

Keeping Quality Teachers Teaching

A special collection on teacher recruitment, retention, and quality.

A RETHINKING SCHOOLS COLLECTION, 2010

RETHINKING SCHOOLS

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Rethinking Schools
1001 East Keefe Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53212
800-669-4192
www.rethinkingschools.org

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Keeping Quality Teachers Teaching

A special collection on teacher recruitment, retention, and quality.

INTRODUCTION

For many years schools in the United States have faced a teacher shortage, especially in areas such as special education, bilingual education, math, and science. This shortage has been exacerbated by an alarming failure on the part of school districts to retain teachers—up to 50 percent of new teachers leave after five years. Moreover, studies have shown an inequitable distribution of veteran and newer teachers across districts, often reinforcing other institutional inequities based on race and class.

The impacts of the above problems are profound and unequal.

Addressing this situation is complicated and requires us to confront fundamental problems that face our public schools: inadequate and unequal funding, lack of planning and collaboration time for teachers, large class size and difficult working conditions, faulty mentoring and evaluation systems, archaic salary systems, inadequate preservice and in-service professional development, and so on.

With the financial assistance of the Ford Foundation, Rethinking Schools presents here a collection of articles from past issues of our magazine that address these difficult issues.

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Teaching's Revolving Door

*New teachers leave the profession at an alarming rate—
and there's no single reason or easy solutions*

■ BY BARBARA MINER

In 2001, in the middle of the day in the middle of the year, Tania Giordani walked off her job as a 7th-8th grade science teacher with the Chicago Public Schools. Giordani, who had a master's degree from Loyola University, had been with the Chicago schools for more than two years and had planned on being a teacher for life. She originally taught at a middle-class white school on the north side where test scores were exemplary and resources were plentiful—so plentiful that she had science textbooks not yet officially on the market.

At the same time, she felt unfulfilled, isolated, and sidetracked from her vision of working in a diverse, urban setting. She asked to be transferred.

Giordani was unprepared for the conditions at her new school, however. The problems were not with the African American, low-income neighborhood—Giordani herself was African American and had grown up on the city's south side, where the school was located.

But she hadn't expected that the students and teachers at the school would have so few resources and so little support from district administrators. What's more, she found she had little hope that district policy makers would rid themselves of the racist assumptions she believes were at the heart of the

school's lack of resources and cavalier attitude toward student learning.

Even today, Giordani can list the problems with precision: her science textbooks were more than 20 years old, sometimes with entire chapters missing, and there weren't enough for all her classes. Her students had a late lunch period, and by the time they got to the cafeteria, sometimes the food was gone. In the winter, the boiler routinely broke and there would be minimal heat. The teachers rarely collaborated and, worse, fought among themselves. The administration, meanwhile, seemed indifferent to the problems and had a bunker mentality.

"The principal even told me my job was not to teach but to baby-sit, and that my first priority was to keep the students safe," Giordani recalled in an interview with *Rethinking Schools*.

Giordani had hoped that after the Christmas holiday break, she would be rejuvenated and would no longer dread going to school each morning. No such luck.

A young single mother of two little girls, Giordani felt she had to protect herself from what she believed was an insane job that left her so drained she couldn't take care of her own family. That January, in the middle of the day in the middle of the week, she made a decision. She took her students to lunch, went to the principal's office, told him she was leaving, and walked out of the school.

Giordani remains a teacher, but at a community college, primarily working

with students getting their GED. Her two daughters attend the Chicago Public Schools, and she is active with parent advocacy groups. "I am not anti-public schools," she says emphatically.

Asked to use the hindsight of eight years to help explain why she left, Giordani pauses a moment and then says: "Lack of support for the teachers and the students. Financial support, emotional support—both."

Ticking Time Bomb

Tania Giordani's story is personally unique. But multiply her decision thousands of times and you get an idea of one of the most serious problems facing schools—every fall, school districts must hire about 270,000 new K-12 teachers to replace those who have left the profession.

The problem of teacher turnover is especially acute among new teachers, with as many as half of new teachers leaving within five years. In urban districts, the problem is worse. It only takes about three years for half of new teachers to leave.

"Retaining teachers is a far larger problem than recruiting new ones," notes Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor at Stanford University who has increasingly played a national role in teacher preparation policy issues. The main dilemma, she adds, "is an exodus of new teachers from the profession."

Students, especially those in high-poverty schools, bear the brunt of the problem. Too often they are taught by

Barbara Miner is a journalist based in Milwaukee. She is the former managing editor of Rethinking Schools. This is the first in a series of articles sponsored by the Ford Foundation on ideas for retaining teachers.



BARBARA MINER

Ariel White in the classroom.

teachers who have not yet developed the experience and skills to be most effective, or who aren't even teaching in their area of expertise.

Studies have repeatedly found that the single most important variable in student achievement is the quality of the teachers. But how does a school or district develop and hold on to the best teaching staff possible?

There's no magic wand. Pay is clearly an issue—beginning teachers with a bachelor's degree earned an average of \$31,753 in 2004-05, far below that of comparable college graduates. What's more, teachers in urban and rural schools tend to get less than their suburban counterparts.

Experts say there are several important steps that are related to, but go beyond, a focus on pay. Here are two of the most essential:

The first step is to recruit the best people possible into the profession, in particular increasing the number of teachers of color. Whether through alternative certification, nontraditional recruitment programs, or increasing beginning pay, a number of initiatives are targeting this step.

The second step, one that is now receiving more attention from policy makers, is what in academic circles is known as improving teacher retention.

One of those inherently boring academic phrases, teacher retention is shorthand for an all-important question: what can be done to ensure that the time, money, and preparation invested in new teachers is not wasted, and that new teachers not only remain in the profession but are given the support necessary to become better teachers? (After all, what's the point of holding on to a new teacher if you don't also try to improve their teaching?)

"The ending goal [of a quality teacher] begins at the beginning," notes Jon Snyder, dean of the graduate school of education at Bank Street College of Education in New York City. "You have to think about the people you are recruiting into the profession. And then you have to train them from the get-go so they know how to teach the children and don't immediately quit out of a sense of failure.

"Once they are teaching, they need ongoing opportunities to get better, because the support that new teachers

The problem of teacher turnover is especially acute among new teachers, with as many as half of new teachers leaving within five years. In urban districts, the problem is worse.

need is different than the support you need if you've been teaching 10 or 20 years," Snyder continues. "And in order to have that continuum of teaching development, you have to reorganize and rethink schools."

Recruitment, teacher preparation, ongoing development, school culture and organization—a tall order. Clearly, teacher retention is a lot more complicated than one might first suspect.

Despite its complexity, the issue of teacher retention needs to be quickly addressed. Two factors are converging to make teacher retention a ticking time bomb of a crisis.

First, more teachers are expected to retire between 2010 to 2020 since any decade since World War II, according to an analysis this September by The Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. Overall, schools will need to hire between 2.9 million and 5.1 million teachers between now and 2020.

Unfortunately, the number of teachers leaving the profession is already on the rise. Nationwide, about 270,000 teachers left in 2004-05, compared to 132,300 in 1988-89, according to a January 2007 study by the U.S. Department of Education. Only about a third did so because they retired.

That's only part of the problem. Those numbers don't take into account teachers who transfer to what they perceive as a "better" school—a number almost as high as those who leave the K-12 classroom every year. Given this country's near-apartheid approach to school-

ing, this means that schools with significant numbers of poor and/or students of color—the very students who could most benefit from quality teachers—disproportionately lose more teachers every year and have a higher percentage of new, inexperienced teachers.

So what's an urban school district to do?

In the next year, *Rethinking Schools* will publish a series of articles looking at the teacher retention crisis in urban schools. There is no one magic formula to turn around what is a complicated problem involving everything from money and resources, to school leadership and culture, to teacher preparation and development, to confronting larger social issues such as poverty, racism, and urban neglect that inherently distort our schools' ability to educate children.

At the same time, there are outlines of potentially beneficial policies. Some center on long-standing issues such as fostering a school culture that promotes learning for all. Some focus on preparing good principals who can be educational leaders. Others require a new paradigm—such as increased job-sharing possibilities, especially given the number of young people entering the profession who may not want to teach full time while also raising a family.

Urban Teacher Residencies

One initiative that has received attention in recent months is what is known as “urban teacher residencies.”

The residencies, for instance, have caught the eye of President-elect Barack Obama, who has made the expansion of teacher residencies and support for new teachers a major component of his education agenda. The Higher Education Act, reauthorized this summer, includes grants to promote teacher residency programs.

“The teacher residency model holds particular promise for addressing the problems of teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention for high-need districts—and may constitute one of the most important reforms of teacher education generally,” Darling-Hammond wrote this June in *Phi Delta Kappan*.

The residency programs are modeled after the medical practice of intense hospital-based collaboration between recent graduates of medical school

and experienced doctors. The teacher residency model, with its year-long focus on urban education and linking of classroom practice with graduate-level coursework, is distinct from the two main paths to teaching: alternative certification programs and traditional teacher education programs.

Existing residency programs are in Boston and Chicago, with a smaller initiative in the Denver area. Several districts, such as Memphis and Philadelphia, are exploring the model. While the programs differ in each city, all subscribe to a core set of principles that, among other things, combine coursework for a master's with a year of classroom teaching in collaboration with a mentor teacher; focus on developing teachers who want to make a long-term commitment to urban schools; provide a stipend for the resident; and structure ongoing support and development for teachers after they receive their master's and are hired by the district.

“While these programs are quite new, there is promising evidence that UTRs [Urban Teacher Residencies] are attracting a new pool of talented and diverse recruits, preparing them to be successful in urban classrooms and keeping them in high needs schools and subjects,” according to a report this fall by The Center for Teaching Quality, based in Hillsborough, N.C., and the Aspen Institute, a Washington think tank, in conjunction with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.

The residency initiatives are only five years old. How they will ultimately play out is unclear. And, like many initiatives, they will inherently be shaped by the political, educational, and financial forces at work in any given district.

So far, however, one indicator is heartening. In Chicago, 95 percent of those in the program were still teaching in the district after three years. In Boston, 90 percent were still teaching.

Preparing Teachers for Imperfect Schools

Ariel White, 22, grew up in Chicago. Her mother is a Chicago Public Schools teacher and her father works in social services. Teaching was in her blood.

White attended Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, which is about 75 miles west of Chicago, and got a degree

in elementary education. She student taught in De Kalb and everything went well. But something was missing.

“I wanted to work in urban schools,” said White, an African American. “It's my passion.”

At the same time, White felt unprepared to jump into an urban setting. “In my student teaching, they taught us best practice, and if you were in the best-case scenario this is what teaching should look like and how you should react to problems,” she said. “But I felt we were just learning how to teach in a perfect school with adequate resources. And I knew the urban schools were far from perfect.”

Then White heard about the urban teacher residency program run by the nonprofit group Academy for Urban School Leadership. Under the program, she would do a full year of teaching alongside a specially trained mentor teacher. She would teach four days a week, attend university classes the fifth day, and at the end receive a master's from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She would be responsible for tuition, but would receive a stipend of \$32,000 a year and healthcare benefits. In return, she would promise to teach for four years in an underperforming Chicago public school.

“When I heard about the program, it seemed too good to be true,” White explained in an interview one afternoon while taking a break from teaching. “It offered the three things I needed: more experience, a master's, and money.”

As part of her residency, White is working with a mentor teacher in a 5th-grade class at the K-8 Chicago Academy. White says she most appreciates the program's focus on collaboration, both among the residents and between individual residents and mentors. Under the residency, White said she feels part of a collaborative team that structures in time to sit down and discuss, together, what is and isn't working in the classroom. (Mentor teachers receive supplemental pay for their extra responsibilities.)

“It's not like, there's the real teacher, and there's the resident,” White says. “You are working together. I also feel the mentors set this tone, that it is not just us learning, but that we are trying to learn from each other.”



BARBARA MINER

Who Leaves and Why

“I couldn’t pay my bills.”

“I never even had time to go to the bathroom.”

“I felt so alone.”

“All we did at my school was test, test, test.”

“My principal was a control freak.”

Whether you are a policy maker, parent, or community activist, you probably know someone who’s left teaching.

The reasons vary, and aren’t always the ones the media focuses on. What’s more, while a family-supporting salary is a prerequisite, by itself it is not enough. Working conditions are equally if not more important.

One popular misconception is that teachers at private schools are less likely to leave than public school teachers. Or that teaching is easier on one’s personal life than other jobs because of summer vacations and holiday breaks.

Both assumptions are wrong.

There were about 3.2 million public K-12 teachers in 2005. The most comprehensive survey of who leaves teaching or changes schools—and why—is the “Teacher Attrition and Mobility” study by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. The study looks both at teachers who leave the K-12 classroom and those who move to another school or district.

Following up on a survey from 2004-05, the 2007 report’s key findings include:

- Some 8.4 percent of public school teachers leave the

Ariel White with a few of her students.

classroom every year (including those who retire).

- Teachers rarely left because they didn’t want to teach. Of those not retiring, the largest percentage stayed in education (25 percent), but not as a K-12 teacher. Only 15 percent said they were “dissatisfied with teaching as a career.”

- Some 76 percent of public school teachers are women. Almost 19 percent of those who left teaching said pregnancy or child rearing were “very important” or “extremely important” reasons. Another 20 percent cited family or personal reasons.

- Almost the same percentage of teachers transfer schools (8.1 percent) as leave the profession.

- The three main reasons teachers moved to a new school was because they had a chance for a better teaching assignment (38 percent), they didn’t like the old school’s administration (37 percent), or they didn’t like the old school’s working conditions (33 percent).

- Schools with 50 percent or more students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch had significantly more teachers changing schools or leaving the profession. The same held true for schools with 35 percent or more students of color. (This has led to what is sometimes called the “qualified teacher gap.”) A U.S. Department of Education study released in September noted that high-poverty schools tend to have less qualified teachers, especially at the high school level. The states with the largest gaps have large urban populations, such as Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

- Public school teachers who left the field of education found working conditions far superior in their new jobs—from social relationships with colleagues, to opportunities for professional development, to intellectual challenge, to availability of resources and support from their bosses. Overall, 65 percent said their workload at the new job was more manageable and that they were better able to balance personal life and work.

The study also dispels some myths concerning private school teachers. For instance, they leave the K-12 classroom at a higher rate (13.6 percent) than public school teachers (8.4 percent). At the same time, they switch schools at a slightly lower rate (5.9 percent compared to 8.1 percent).

The two main reasons private school teachers switched schools was for better salary or benefits (46 percent) or higher job security (33 percent). About half switched to a public school. It was rare, however, for public school teachers to switch to a private school.

Overall, the study is in line with other analyses. A 2006 study from Duke University, for instance, found that new teachers stayed or left primarily based on the principal’s leadership and school climate. If teachers felt they were respected members of a schoolwide learning community, they were more likely to stay.

—BARBARA MINER

On a practical level, White says she is learning any number of small details about teaching that she never got in her coursework at DeKalb. “I’m not struggling with the content, but [I am with] classroom management and students focusing rather than getting easily distracted,” she says.

She hesitates to list some of the classroom management techniques that have made a difference, because they seem so small to an outsider. Encouraged, she mentions one.

In her old school, if the class were getting rowdy the teacher would clap to get the class’s attention, and then have the other students clap. “The clapping drove me crazy,” White says with a laugh. “We were clapping all the time and it was so loud.”

In her residency this year, White has learned to modify the approach and instead snap her fingers. She finds it much more effective, and easier on the classroom noise level.

She has also learned to avoid unnecessary power struggles with her students, and to praise them when they do something right and not just criticize them when they misbehave. Most important, White says, she and her mentor have time on a daily basis, usually at the end of the school day, to sit down and discuss the students and how they are doing.

Just as with Giordano, White’s story is personally unique. But her appreciation for the residency program is grounded in what she outlines as an overall approach that values teacher collaboration, respects teachers as professionals, provides time for reflection and discussion, and develops a corps of urban teachers committed to remaining on the job beyond those critical first years.

The teacher residency programs, for instance, also provide support structures, such as professional development and coaches, once residents graduate. In Boston, residents receive ongoing support for an additional year; in Chicago, coaching continues through the first two years of full-time teaching.

The Chicago program currently has 79 residents at six schools, known as training academies, that are part of the Chicago Public Schools. It partners with National-Louis University and the University of Illinois at Chicago. In Boston,

One initiative that has received attention in recent months is what is known as ‘urban teacher residencies.’

there were 84 residents in the program last year, and the program partners with the University of Massachusetts-Boston. In Boston, 55 percent of the residents in 2007-08 were teachers of color; in Chicago the figure was 57 percent.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) represents teachers in both Boston and Chicago. Kathy Buzad, an AFT specialist in educational issues, notes that the programs are still relatively new, so their track record is limited. At the same time, they have many positive aspects. “They have the potential to effectively address the urban teacher shortage, both in terms of a diverse teaching staff and in supporting new teachers with mentoring and ongoing professional development in an authentic learning environment,” she said.

While the programs are linked by their overall orientation, they are independent of each other. In Boston, there is a special focus on teaching middle and high school teachers in math and science. In addition, all the residents earn dual licensing in special education.

The Chicago program initiated by the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), meanwhile, embarked in 2006 on a parallel project. AUSL has taken over the management of low-performing Chicago Public Schools, known as “turn-around schools.”

While the teacher residency program has operated with little public fanfare, the turn-around program has been highly controversial in Chicago, in part because it has been a top-down model of reform that is at odds with grassroots reform efforts such as elected local school councils, a landmark reform giving parents significant input into school decisions. Such factors have raised concerns about AUSL’s strategic game plan not only for the turn-around schools, but the residency program.

Political controversy might not be the most difficult question facing resi-

dency programs, however. In the midst of the economic downturn, will districts decide that the model costs too much in the short term, regardless of potential long-term benefits?

Issues of Sustainability

Mentors, coaches, and yearlong residencies obviously cost more money than a traditional student-teacher arrangement. This raises a question that plagues many a good idea: Is the program financially sustainable?

To date, the residencies have received money from a mix of district, federal, and foundation/private funds, with the bulk of money from the districts. In Chicago this year, it cost about \$5 million to run the residency program, according to Tim Cawley, head of finances for AUSL. About \$3 million of that comes from the district. In Boston, about 60 percent of the funding also comes from the district; about 10 percent from private funds.

Supporters of the teacher residency programs argue that, in the long run, developing an effective, stable group of teachers is cost effective, especially if districts look at how much they spend on new teacher recruitment and preparation and rethink how they spend professional development monies.

Nationwide, teacher turnover costs \$7.3 billion a year, according to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future. In some districts, the costs are shockingly high. In Milwaukee, the average cost per teacher who left was \$15,325, according to the commission. In Chicago, the average cost was \$17,872, with the total cost to the district about \$86 million per year.

That’s a lot of money to spend on failure, in this case the failure of teacher retention.

Snyder of Bank Street College argues that to confront the problem, a comprehensive approach is needed—whether better recruitment, better preparation, or better professional development. Not to be forgotten, he continues, is the need for new attitudes and a willingness to work together.

“It takes a village to raise a teacher, but too many are saying how the other group is screwed up, whether the districts or the schools or the colleges,” he says. “OK, we’re all messed up. Now let’s sit down and figure out what to do.” ■

Reinventing Schools That Keep Teachers in Teaching

■ BY DEBORAH MEIER

Editors Note: This essay is another in a series of Ford Foundation-supported articles and essays focusing on retaining and nurturing teachers. Your comments and anecdotes are welcome. Please address them to Jody Sokolower at jody@rethinkingschools.org.

If we want teachers who are smart, caring, alive to students' needs, and are in it for the long haul, we need to consider how to create schools that are themselves centers for the continual learning of everyone connected to them. We've learned most of what we know about teaching K-12 from our own schooling experience. Unlearning powerful past history in the absence of equally powerful settings for relearning won't work.

We can't ignore the likelihood that few would-be teachers are themselves "well-educated" when they walk in the door—on subject matter or on teaching/learning. But the school setting is a gold mine for doing something about it in the very process of educating the young. So, it was for me when I began teaching in the early 1960s, and so it was for the schools I helped found, in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Universities can assist in this process, as can every other educational agency we can lay our hands on. But the schools are the center of where it must take place. Because in that way it does double or triple duty—it *educates* kids, their teachers, and their families all at the same time. Whether young teachers improve and whether they re-

main in the profession depends in large part on the character of the schools they find themselves in.

The startling reality for me was that even in an average inner-city kindergarten in Chicago in the 1960s, I found more intellectual stimulation than I had experienced in graduate school. No doubt, my previous education helped me to sort out what I was observing, but kindergarten teaching did so by involving me in ways that no school before had. It did so by adopting exactly the opposite message than the current style of standards-heavy reforms propose.

It was my own empowerment—in the company of children—that reignited my curiosity about matters I had long since lost interest in. My good fortune was to enter that classroom at a time when my own children were young and where I found some interesting experienced teachers. By happenstance, the school I began at was small. We formed an instant informal community; we couldn't stop talking about what we were discovering.

Joining with others over a shared interest became the model of schoolwide life. We recounted the connections kids

made between the seemingly obvious and the quite profound. We noticed ways in which the so-called "language deprived" children had rich and extensive vocabularies once they were excited and involved. We tried to make sense of the connections we were making with families who at times appeared passive or angry.

We were insatiably curious about subjects we had once thought dull, like mathematics. We signed up for workshops, went to newly created teacher centers, and built networks of adults who were fascinated by life itself—and how we come to discover it. The company of both peers and young people—the cross-generational communities that grew out of this work—became our homes-away-from-home.

It was an adventure, not a chore. We couldn't imagine ever "burning out."

I had the odd good fortune to go from this small Southside Chicago school (Beulah Shoemith) to an even smaller Head Start center in Philadelphia—where three of us started our own "school" in the basement of a church. A year later I got a job in a large Central Harlem elementary school, where the principal allowed four of us to use one wing of the building for a pre-K through 3rd grade sub-school. And in 1974, a daring New York City district superintendent decided to give me and a few other teachers the chance to start "our own schools"—in regular neighborhood school buildings.

East Harlem was, at that time, considered one of the poorest and educa-

*Deborah Meier began teaching in Chicago in the early 1960s. She later taught Head Start in Philadelphia and kindergarten in Harlem. She founded a number of public elementary and secondary schools in New York and Boston, all of which served predominantly low-income African American and Latino students. Meier, a 1987 MacArthur Foundation fellow, is the author of many books, including *The Power of Their Ideas* and *In Schools We Trust*.*



ROB DUNLAVEY

In short, for most of us, retention will take care of itself, given a human-friendly school.

tionally least successful districts. We opened our doors as Central Park East (CPE), which led to a bold experiment in small, self-governing public schools—a bit like charter schools, but part-and-parcel of the public system. Over the next 20 years the idea grew to be almost normal—before the latest round of reforms hit us all: standardization via testing, scripted, “paternalistic,” top-

down deform. Nearly 100 small CPEish schools opened their doors in New York City between 1974 and 1985. Simultaneously, Central Park East became CPE I, then CPE II, then River East, and finally, in 1985, we started a secondary (7-12) school CPESS.

Our high school mentor, Ted Sizer, had just written *Horace’s Compromise* and started the Coalition of Essential

Schools. He advised us to keep it simple. Only then, he told us, can you keep your mind on what cannot and must not be simplified: the mind of the learner and the subject under study. It turned out, as with the elementary schools, that this work appealed to many other teachers because keeping it simple (and small) meant that it could also be a place for adults to learn from too.

Once again, the same formula that works for kids, works for the adults who work with and for them.

Put interesting adults together with interesting young people—add their families and other curious neighbors—and you have 98 percent of what’s needed to keep them all enthralled. And it’s not that we chose more interesting adults than were in other schools. It was simply that we structured school life to ignite their curiosity and conversations.

Human beings, if treated as such, don’t burn out the way appliances do. But they do need some time off, especially from the labor-intensity of teaching. That’s why we didn’t take an “all or nothing” approach. When a colleague’s husband died suddenly, leaving her a bereft single mother, we reorganized the school so that she co-taught with a close colleague in adjoining rooms with a third adult to give her the time and support needed for a few years. When another teacher needed time to explore becoming a playwright, he took off a year with our blessing and then came back, also with our blessing. But we also created space within the school for us all to play different roles, even just temporarily. The school became a place where adults—including parents—gathered for shared meals and talk, where parent-teacher conferences were family-school conferences, something between celebrations of learning and brainstorming future plans.

We mixed ages and grade levels, and made sure the teachers of the younger students weren’t considered “dumber” than the teachers of the oldest by putting everyone on the same committee-of-the-whole. We designed the curriculum together, including graduation requirements. Would-be graduates were judged by their peers, by parents, by the teachers they had long ago, and the current faculty, as well as by members of the larger public. This same collective met to share their concerns, review the work of the school, and make changes for the future. Every year, for example, the high school staff reviewed, revised, and voted on its initial “understandings,” the graduation requirements, and the rules of the game.

It was *hard* and fun. The school

Put interesting adults together with interesting young people—add their families and other curious neighbors—and you have 98 percent of what’s needed to keep them all enthralled.

challenged us to expand our roles and accept new ways of thinking. Case in point, we all became architects. Just as the kids needed spaces of many sorts so did we—indoors, outdoors, big rooms, little cubbies. We needed, for example, a “common” room, a sort of central village square for work, exchanging ideas, and access to each other. Our hallways needed rethinking, to provide wall space as well as sitting and talking space. We needed a schedule of some sort, the simpler the better. We needed sufficient time for each part of this equation (parents, teachers, kids) to spend time together and apart from each other—time to reflect, observe, and reflect again, to read about and share information that we might later choose to follow up on—minutes later, months later, and, if needed, years later.

We built an in-school culture that bound us together on behalf of a common cause, not *against* a common enemy. Most of us didn’t want to leave. Some did due to family moves to other locations, occasionally for pregnancy, and a few teachers found this way of teaching did not satisfy their notion of teaching. However, some went on to start other sister schools with similar school cultures. Just as our graduates stay in touch with us and with each other, the same is true for staff. They have clustered together for summer retreats years after they were working together, and many look back nostalgically from their current positions as coaches or college teachers with longing for the excitement of those years.

What’s interesting even about our nostalgia is that we recognize that while the work may have been hard and time-consuming (and our children at home can attest to that), even after 20, 30, and 40 years of teaching, we keep hanging around schools. In short, for most of us, retention will take care of itself, given a human-friendly school. I tell new principals that their first task is not to “do something” about children’s

learning, but to look upon their staff as their classroom. If they can “do something” about the learning curve of the adults—and that includes families and neighbors—that will get transferred across the generation gap to the young. It goes also for the relationship between younger and older students, more and less experienced teachers—who can play powerful roles in passing on know-how to each other. That’s the job of a principal, their “tunnel vision” task is to keep their eye on the whole so that others can focus on this or that child or classroom. Oddly enough, to do so well requires that the responsibility remain in the hands of everyone. We don’t at such schools ask, “Who’s accountable?” We’re all accountable, including the kids, their families, the larger society. We therefore save a lot of time for asking each other—“what else could I/you/we have done?” “Come look at this piece of writing!” “Come visit my class.” “Talk with José and see what you think.” “Read this, read that—it’ll amaze you, surprise you, reassure you.” And out of all this “just talk,” comes caring about both ideas and practice, and each other.

At Central Park East Secondary School and Boston-based Mission Hill, the last school I started, we all agreed we needed at least five hours of adults-only time a week, a few retreats away from school, and time at the end of the year and before school starts—the way any halfway decent summer camp does. We invented ways to do this. We developed a community service program for the kids that gave each cluster of four to five teachers a whole morning off each week. The key is that the faculty was in a position to figure most of these things out themselves. On matters such as these, they were the ultimate deciders. If we are concerned about “retaining teachers,” then we need to be concerned about making schools more democratic.

That included deciding everything from whom to hire and, if necessary,

counseling those who were not making it out of teaching. We often felt that someone was not right for our kind of expectations and approach but that they'd probably be OK in a school that taught differently. But in both the elementary and secondary school, we mostly worked with people to help them become very good teachers. That meant we had to figure out how to "judge" each other in ways that sustained a sense of community, but also maintained our responsibility as heads-of-school. In a user-friendly school, these are not as mysterious as they appear, even if hard to explain. No one likes to teach badly, and we are all sensitive to even the facial expressions of colleagues who are—on purpose—in and out of each other's classrooms, share kids and families, and spend many hours together. It's also the one special responsibility of the head-teacher/principal to figure out what might help—either to help teacher *x* become better or on rare occasions to help teacher *y* consider another path for future work.

We need lots of forms of networking—the adult staff is one network, our teacher-colleagues city- and nationwide are another, our students' families and their community is still one more, and on and on. Crossovers make it easier for me, so I loved working in the same community as I taught and where my own children were schooled, but I found ways to make up for it when I didn't. The smaller the class size and the student/teacher ratio, and the school itself, the easier it is to manage these networks, and this close observation. And it improves the odds. Every time we can improve the odds, we need to do it—weighing the trade-offs carefully and opting for what best creates that interesting cross-generational community.

There are those seminal experiences in our lives that give us a taste of what might be possible in the larger society more of the time. Not replicas of such a society, but a means for judging what those big words might mean—trust, respect, understanding, along with affection and loyalty. Good schools are not the only place where these happen, but these are some of the few places left where they can happen in public spaces, where our joint work—not our kinship or even friendship—is what brings us to-

gether, and where our responsibility for each other's learning is the measure of our mutual success. These are the kind of institutions that nurture attachment, commitment, and growth.

It's doable. The details will vary from school to school, and some will fit one person and not another. But we cannot dare continue to keep kids in schools for so many, many years—incarcerated if you will—without doing a better job of making our schools places we all love. Places that we can't wait to come to ev-

ery morning and that we leave, exhausted and pleased with ourselves, every afternoon. Places where long-term experience and wisdom are not dismissed as the bad products of "seniority" rules, but what good societies take seriously. Schools are for the children, but they are also where the young build their images of adulthood. Our schools need to serve the students and the teachers.

It's doable. To accept the status quo would be the greatest disservice to students and the society at large. ■

Connected to the Community

An effective model for preparing and retaining teachers

■ BY MARIANNE SMITH AND JAN OSBORN



KATHERINE STREETER

Editors Note: This article is another in a series of Ford Foundation-supported articles and essays focusing on retaining and nurturing teachers.

Your comments and anecdotes are welcome. Address them to jody@rethinkingschools.org.

Marianne Smith is a candidate for the Ph.D. in Education Leadership and Policy at the University of California, Riverside. Her research focuses on first-generation college students and the role of student services in persistence and retention. She currently works as an independent education consultant. For more information about Project I-Teach, contact Marianne at msmith@marianne-smith.com. Jan Osborn holds a joint faculty appointment in English and Education at Chapman University. She will complete a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of California, Riverside in summer 2009. She can be reached at josborn@chapman.edu.

**Some students' names have been changed for this article.*

Ten years ago, Acela* seemed destined for academic failure, her dream of becoming a teacher was as distant as the stars. She had swirled between three community colleges in Orange County, Calif., failing or withdrawing from

courses for a variety of reasons, ranging from lack of academic support to financial problems, forcing her to prioritize work over her studies.

Today, Acela is an elementary bilingual resource teacher. She graduated from Chapman University with a 3.9 GPA in her education specialist credential coursework, is nearing completion of a master's degree, and remains committed to working with K-12 students from low-income communities of color.

Acela's ability to become a teacher and contribute back to her community was due to Project I-Teach, an innovative program designed to help first-generation college students from low-income and immigrant communities become teachers.

The two of us, who helped develop and oversee Project I-Teach, believe the project provides enduring lessons on educating teachers committed to working in high-need schools, teachers who stay in the profession beyond that crucial five-year mark. Lessons from the project underscore the importance of believing in, and developing, the potential within ethnically and linguistically diverse communities.

Project I-Teach, funded by U.S. Department of Education grants, was run in partnership with Chapman University in Orange County from 1998 through 2008. It encompassed an emphasis on social justice teaching, a respect for the aspirations and abilities of its partici-

pants, and a comprehensive approach that included financial, educational, cultural, and personal support.

Over 130 participants, most underrepresented minorities, earned degrees and credentials. The participants reflected the diversity of the community. Almost three quarters were first-generation college graduates. Ninety-one percent were bilingual, speaking Spanish, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Farsi, Creole, Tagalog, Romanian, Indonesian, Taiwanese, Hindi, and Punjabi with the largest group (67 percent) representing the Hispanic/Latino community prominent in Orange County. Of these participants, 118 are now teachers in K-12 schools. Early data show that the professional retention rates far surpass the national average, with the earliest group of participants having remained employed in schools for an average of seven years. Not surprisingly, they hold leadership positions and serve as team leaders, department chairs, professional development leaders, members of school site and principal advisory boards, coordinators of services for English learners, mentors to newly hired teachers, and, now, as administrators.

The Origins of I-Teach

In 1996, California reduced class sizes in an attempt to improve reading and mathematics performance. One unanticipated consequence was the hiring of scores of novice teachers unprepared for the challenges of teaching, especially in low-income schools, and more likely to quickly leave the profession. The convergence of increased need, the retirement of record numbers of veteran teachers, and an inability to retain new teachers created a crisis.

The economic costs of teacher turnover are staggering, with the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007) estimated costs to schools and districts at more than \$7 billion nationally.

Costs to student achievement are not as easily quantified. What is known is that novice teachers are less effective and that high-need schools serving low-income communities of color employ a disproportionate number. With little understanding of the sociocultural context and norms of low-income schools and communities, novice teachers, as

noted by University of California-Davis researcher Barbara Merino (2007), are "more vulnerable to holding negative expectations for students who are English learners, or who are from a different race or class."

With data indicating that half of the nation's African American and Latino children are concentrated in segregated, high-poverty schools—schools with low achievement and high drop-out rates—employing and retaining the "right" teachers is paramount.

In Orange County, a community generally associated with palm-lined boulevards, coastal mansions, and Disneyland, students of color make up the majority of the county's public school enrollment and are segregated in low-income neighborhood schools and districts. Spanish, Vietnamese, and Cambodian are common languages in the schools, yet teachers remain predominantly monolingual and white.

Marianne, as the Second Language Program Coordinator for a suburban Orange County district, had seen these issues firsthand. She knew that many of the district's bilingual instructional aides aspired to teach but had limited financial resources and little understanding of the world of higher education. In 1998, she jumped at the opportunity to respond to a federal grant. Collaborating with the associate dean of Chapman University's School of Education and two other school district coordinators, the first Project I-Teach was conceived and developed. A subsequent federal grant extended and expanded the project, and during its 10 years, the program received \$2.9 million in federal funds.

The goal of Project I-Teach was to develop teachers from and for immigrant and/or low-income communities who would remain in the profession, stay connected with their community, and model the potential of community members meeting the needs of their children. Simply put, students *from* the community would return *to* the community as educators.

The project intentionally looked for students who would have been overlooked by other programs, such as Teach for America. Being selected had little to do with students' previous academic achievement. We looked for first-generation college students with

specific strengths: bilingualism, understanding of the community, and a desire to be educated. Regardless of grade point averages, educational starts and stops, financial pressures, and myriad other concerns, they would not be applying if they did not want to teach; we kept this uppermost in our minds as we interviewed classified staff from local school districts and, later, students from a nearby community college.

Carol Rodgers (2006), professor of education at SUNY Albany, explains that "becoming a teacher or teacher educator committed to social change requires a fundamental shift in the way one views the world, one's place in it, and one's relationship to others. ...To make a difference, teachers must care from the inside out—rather than because they should—about social justice issues." Students were selected on the basis of already being on the inside, aware of the realities their students would face. The project's role would become one of providing an education that helped participants recognize their own and their students' capacities to make the fundamental changes in education that could change society.

Our first priority, however, was to meet students' very real and complex needs—academic, personal, financial—as they worked through undergraduate and, later, graduate coursework. Financial support was foremost. With few exceptions, participants were low-income and Chapman, a private university, was expensive. Therefore, most of the federal funds and in-kind contributions for Project I-Teach were allocated to tuition and fees. Expected to participate in funding their education, students continued to work part time and, where appropriate, accepted subsidized federal loans.

Scholarships, however, are only a small part of the equation when serving first-generation students. Therefore, Project I-Teach provided all textbooks and bought resource materials such as graphing calculators, tape recorders, and shared laptop computers. As we came to understand other needs that distracted students from their university work, we made as many accommodations as possible: arranging for eye exams and glasses; providing bus passes and nutrition; referring students to outside agencies for

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health care and counseling. Our intent was to level the playing field, providing our students with the resources that other students often take for granted.

Many I-Teach participants presented transcripts of early coursework that, most certainly, would prevent them from transferring to the university. Prior to being accepted in the project, Acela, for example, earned a cumulative GPA of 1.3. Helping her get back on track meant guiding her through the process of community college academic renewal and supporting her in new coursework, as well as helping her with issues such as finding affordable child care and understanding the culture of higher education. Like most first-generation community college students, I-Teach participants found catalog course explanations convoluted and the university's bureaucratic structures incomprehensible.

The project provided a form of “intrusive advisement” that went beyond course selection. Some advisement sessions became opportunities for students to role-play, developing the confidence to approach faculty members with questions. The sessions also allowed students to discuss strategies for study groups or

to rethink work schedules and personal budgets.

We didn't wait for students to come to us with questions. Instead, we went to them, calling their homes on weekends, holding “office hours” at a vacant table on the community college campus. The I-Teach grant office became a place of centralized student services, from negotiating financial aid to academic mentoring and dealing with pressing issues in students' lives—births, deaths, illnesses, trips across the border, documentation.

We believe that the relationships of trust and respect built during frequent advising sessions allowed students to expose their vulnerabilities, their fears, and their frustrations with higher education. This, in turn, opened the door to further support and assistance. For example, in a lunchtime conversation early in the project, students shared an ongoing concern that they had not been adequately prepared, in secondary school or at the community college, for university work:

Daisy: You know, I feel so stupid. I mean everybody in class is so smart and they use words I don't even know.

They grew up in this environment, but I didn't.

Alondra: I know what you mean. I don't understand half of what is said in class.

Daisy: Some words that other students use and the conversations they have with the professors ... I have to present with these people. It just so happens that I'm in a group with the smarter people.

Marianne: What do you mean by “smarter people”?

Alondra: Yeah, that is what I was going to say.

Daisy: I feel intimidated.

Information from such conversations provided a chance to reflect on what the project might offer students from community colleges who were transitioning to the university, from an environment where they were part of the ethnic/language majority to one where they were clearly the minority.

Those studying to be secondary teachers completed a degree in a content area such as Spanish, mathematics, or history. Selecting a major for our future elementary teachers became particularly important. Early cohorts were placed in liberal studies, the traditional route. We found, however, that prescribed classes, many of which were survey level, did not challenge students to move beyond traditional curriculum, tackle critical local and global issues, or delve into literature outside the Eurocentric canon. We opted instead for Peace Studies, a “problem-centered, multicultural, interdisciplinary” major that provided rigorous coursework from various fields and was taught by a multicultural faculty whose work focused on global social justice issues. Students were initially disappointed by this choice, some voicing concerns to the dean. Within a term, however, they began to appreciate the demanding content, discussing conflict in the Middle East, questioning the global political economy, or analyzing the United Nation's agenda. Students began to look for multiple perspectives, perusing newspapers outside the mainstream; reading authors such as Brazilian Paulo Coelho and Nigerian Chinua Achebe. We supplemented major coursework with mathematics, English, art, science, linguistics, and language to

ensure they entered teaching with broad knowledge.

Written assignments, in particular, posed a challenge. Often mis- or under-educated during the primary and secondary grades, our students relied on formulaic writing, believing that regurgitating what an author or professor had said would be valued. It became central to help them find their own voices, write about their experiences and worldviews, and develop confidence in their academic writing abilities. To do so, we established a writers' workshop series and provided one-on-one support for all participants. The intent was to best support students, addressing their strengths *as* strengths and working through areas that hindered their written assignments. For example, Abel, a math major, did not initially pass the university writing proficiency exam and this failure became the defining point of how he saw himself as an academic writer. Working through this type of discouragement was an important workshop component and an example of the overall approach of Project I-Teach—overcoming barriers and misconceptions that could derail students from completing their degree.

The project also created our own “Themes for Study and Growth,” focusing on bilingual and bicultural students becoming critically conscious of the complexities of teaching and learning within a social structure that often dismisses diversity and focuses on a limited range of skills. Our themes—Developing a Community of Learners; Developing Knowledge and Professional Confidence Through Inquiry; and Developing Perception Through Aesthetic Education—were designed to accomplish this.

Developing a Community of Learners

Project I-Teach students frequently came to the university from the known (diverse work sites and community colleges) into the unknown (a university with little visible diversity, linguistic or ethnic). Although they had been accepted to the university, Project I-Teach students were often strangers in a foreign land. Anthropologist Yi-Fu Tan tells the story of being newly arrived in London where he was accidentally injured at the train station. After the im-

mediate concerns of stopping the flow of blood in a public place, he recounts that people who had initially helped him “looked right through me as though I were a ghost.”

This invisibility creates a sense of isolation for many students of diverse ethnic and linguistic experience. They are out of their element, disembodied, as it were, and can disappear without notice. I-Teach students' immediate needs had been met—financial aid, books, parking stickers. However, once on campus, they often sensed this ghostlike invisibility. As Project I-Teach evolved, the two of us, and the students themselves, consciously strove to create a community on campus, a place where students were known and were recognized as an important part of the larger university community. Developing an I-Teach student/faculty center became essential.

When the project began, it was housed in the corner of a large storage/meeting room where students would meet with Marianne. Slowly, over a period of months, the meeting space became more defined with a table and chairs and ultimately a student-worker desk. But the sense of community only became palpable when Marianne negotiated the use of a large, relatively unused space across the hall. She created the Project I-Teach offices and student lounge with comfortable chairs, a boardroom table, computers, white board, refrigerator, and adjoining offices for the two of us. The space provided what communities need—a shared experience. Students studied here; they debriefed classes; they spoke in Spanish if they felt like it; they met with us in both scheduled meetings and in informal “let’s sit down a minute and talk” sessions. It became a safe place to have difficult conversations.

When asked to write about what they were thinking as they contemplated coming to the university for their first semester or coming back to campus for another year, the students expressed the importance of the community they had created:

- I felt like I was being dragged by a river and ... I-Teach ... was the big rock I was able to hold on to.
- I-Teach has taught me that hard work is necessary to be successful and that

this phase, stage in our lives can be so much easier if you have a core group of people that one can relate to.

- My core group ... is I-Teach students.
- The I-Teach program has helped me (and at times drove me to the edge) to finish my goal.
- Now that I'm starting the credential program, I feel confident that I'm closer to my dream of being a teacher.

We found that clustering two or three students into course sections was also important. The presence of a colleague who shared similar experiences gave students added confidence and also allowed them to share lecture and discussion notes and generate meaning together.

Students continue to build community. For example, several students who are now teachers organized round-table discussions among their peers on topics such as standardized testing, critical pedagogy, and curriculum.

Confidence Through Inquiry

Early in the project, when a group of I-Teach participants was reading Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, Marianne chartered a bus so the students could hear Kozol when he spoke in Los Angeles. On the way home, the energy was palpable. The I-Teach students, many of whom were never quite sure they belonged at the university, realized they had entered the larger educational conversation; they belonged. The picture from that trip hung in the project office for years, a marker of transformation. Later, collaborating with the county human rights commission, the project brought Linda Christensen to speak with county educators. Linda acknowledged the I-Teach students, valued their perspectives, and asked them to share their ideas with the larger group. They saw themselves through Linda's eyes: capable, intelligent, socially conscious educators.

In writing the second grant proposal in 2002, Marianne included funding for similar initiatives of professional inquiry. She brought nationally known social justice advocates such as Bill Bigelow and Linda Christensen; author and historian Howard Zinn; artist/educator Barbara Ellmann; and Jeff Sapp from

the Southern Poverty Law Center. The project also co-sponsored a university lecture series to bring respected educators such as Deborah Meier and the Algebra Project's Bob Moses. In both initiatives, Project I-Teach students were able to meet with the presenters and discuss community issues.

In yet another endeavor, Marianne collaborated with TEAMS, based at the University of San Francisco, so participants could enroll in AmeriCorps, in part to learn how service-learning deepens students' ability to make meaning. Several students, for example, serving as teacher/mentors to a group of local high school students, helped them develop a service-learning project on the life and values—respect for life, celebrating community, knowledge, innovation, and nonviolence—of farmworker organizer César Chavez. The project culminated in a public photo installation to help students and families see their often maligned community through a more positive lens.

Because Project I-Teach students did this work as a community of learners, they continue to support one another as they face the frustrations of public education. They call one another for reinforcement, they email, and they meet at local educational forums. A group even organized a trip to San Francisco for the 2008 Teachers 4 Social Justice Conference, a trip we had made together the final year of the project. Project I-Teach graduates also often work together. One local school has four I-Teach participants as teachers, another has three, providing an important support network.

Perception Through Aesthetic Education

An unexpectedly important component came from our third theme for study and growth: Developing Perception Through Aesthetic Education. Educational philosopher and author Maxine Greene defines *aesthetics* as the branch of philosophy concerned with “perception, sensation, imagination, and how they relate to knowing, understanding, and feeling about the world” (2001). She describes *education* as “a process of enabling persons to become different . . . [able to] look through the lenses of various ways of knowing, seeing, and feeling in a conscious endeavor to impose different

orders upon experience.” Greene uses Wallace Stevens' (1982) blue guitar as a metaphor for the imagination:

They said, “You have a blue guitar,

You do not play things as they are.”

The man replied, “Things as they are

Are changed upon the blue guitar.”

In a way, our students came to Chapman University with a blue guitar, their very presence changing the way things are and reflecting a new perspective. At the same time, we believed, enriching their educational opportunities might provide them the means to play that guitar as educators, changing the status quo to better serve students whose ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds are too often marginalized.

Greene, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, advocates that students engage live works of art in order to help them harness and develop their imaginations. She acknowledges that the arts “do not change the world, but they change the living beings who might change the world.” Project I-Teach worked in this way, providing opportunities for students to empower themselves so that *they* could change education and thereby change the world. We wanted to refocus their understanding of education away from decontextualized learning, toward the power of the imagination to shape change in individual and community life.

We made a concerted effort to develop the aesthetic education theme, in part by investing in season tickets at South Coast Repertory Theatre. We realized that if our students were to have aesthetic experiences that released their imaginations to the possible, we would have to develop their “ability to pull aside the curtain of habit, automatism, banality, so that alternative possibilities can be perceived” (Greene, 2001). Through short entry-point experiences and attending the plays, I-Teach students began to feel they belonged at the theatre, began to realize that their own meaning-making with the arts allowed them to question assumptions about education and the larger society. The work of transforming self and society became inextricably linked with the work of art.

A most powerful experience occurred

in the summer of 2006 when we took 20 students to the Lincoln Center Institute in New York City. The students read Greene prior to the weeklong institute, and, in a post-institute reflection session Ruben captured the essence of the project's work with the aesthetic education theme:

This, in turn, will enable my students to find their true selves, to be enlightened with self discovery, to enjoy the process of learning that puts them at the center of the curriculum, and to help them realize that their voices, backgrounds, actions, and minds matter in this world.

Into the Future

Ten years after the project started, the second five-year federal grant ended. Supported by the two of us, and occasionally by an assistant, the project has become a model for preparing and retaining teachers for ethnic and linguistically driven communities. I-Teach participants remain engaged learners, with three quarters of them having completed or enrolled in master's degree programs—a significant percentage given the low high school and college completion rates for Latino and African American students.

Through example and position, I-Teach teachers are beginning to create opportunities to reshape not just what is taught, but how content is presented, how communities are served, and how students and families are supported and respected. They are, indeed, students from the community returning to the community, strengthening the roots of social change. ■

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The Debate Over Differentiated Pay

The devil is in the details

■ BY BARBARA MINER

If you want to stir up a hornet's nest of controversy, propose merit pay for teachers. Based on decades of experience with programs that rewarded a few teachers based on standardized test scores, legions of teachers will search for the biggest, deadliest cans of Raid they can find.

But if you want to start an interesting discussion, propose an alternative pay structure that goes beyond the traditional reliance on seniority and graduate-level credits and also promotes teacher leadership. Educators who agree on any number of issues, from the dangers of privatization to the importance of smaller class sizes, may differ strongly on how to respond to your proposal.

Welcome to pay for performance. Or alternative compensation. Or differentiated pay. Whatever you call it, it is emerging as a leading debate in education reform. The only surefire agreement among progressive teachers and union activists: Don't use the term "merit pay" unless you want to

end the discussion before it begins. Even noneducators President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan know better. Despite media headlines that consistently refer to their "merit pay" proposals, neither has used that term in their speeches or initiatives.

"Everybody knows we are against merit pay, that's not new," notes Kay Brilliant, director of education policy and practice for the National Education Association (NEA). "The question for everybody who is writing and thinking about it is: 'What is it we are actually talking about here? What do we want?'"

Both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have made it clear they do not outright oppose modifications in the traditional salary system, but insist it be done at the local level with the input and support of teachers and, in states with collective bargaining, as part of the union

contract. They have also made clear that the devil is in the details.

Historically, those details have often proved poisonous for students, teachers, and schools because the merit pay plans focused on standardized test scores, distorted the curriculum, set teachers against each other in a scramble for crumbs from a limited pie of money, and were imposed by noneducators with little understanding of classroom and school realities.

In recent years, however, the discussion has evolved and, particularly among union activists, has moved far beyond the merit pay proposals of previous decades. Some union locals have linked differentiated pay to "career ladders" for teachers, to encouraging national board certification, or to supporting teachers as mentors and districtwide curriculum leaders. Younger teachers, frustrated that they can't reach the maximum salary without postgraduate degrees and many years of seniority, have increased the pressure to rethink pay structures.

At the same time, other developments have narrowed the debate. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the testing craze, for instance, have forced

Barbara Miner is a journalist based in Milwaukee. She is the former managing editor of Rethinking Schools. This is one in a series of articles sponsored by the Ford Foundation on ideas for retaining teachers.

‘My favorite term is differentiated pay, with the differentiation on grounds that are both plausible and credible to teachers’

—Adam Urbanski, president of the Rochester Teachers Union and founder of the Teacher Union Reform Network

schools to narrow the definition of student achievement to results on standardized tests; a crudely economist approach has increasingly limited the purpose of public schooling to getting ahead in the global marketplace. Within that context, any suggestion of linking pay to student achievement becomes suspect.

And now there are the Obama administration’s Race to the Top proposals, under which \$4.3 billion in federal monies will be granted to spur innovation and to reform public schools. After the proposed guidelines were issued in late July, discussions over differentiated pay suddenly became more contentious as the administration linked quality teaching to standardized test scores.

The NEA, for instance, in Aug. 21 comments regarding the proposed guidelines, noted: “Up to this point, the NEA has been a vocal supporter of the Obama administration’s plans to transform public education. . . . Given the details of the Race to the Top grant proposal, NEA must now ask: Where did that commitment to local communities go? . . . [Regarding assessing student learning,] what is being proposed is simply tweaking the current top-down, federally mandated insistence on hewing to standardized test scores.”

To get a hint of the variety of approaches on how to respond to the debate on differentiated pay, which is separate from but now intertwined with the Obama/Duncan proposals, consider these comments:

Adam Urbanski, president of the Rochester Teachers Union in New York and founder of the Teacher Union Reform Network:

First of all, I believe a response is required and is long overdue. And the reason we are dealing with such bad

renditions of this issue is because we have not come to a consensus among ourselves about what should be the conversation. And so, as Machiavelli said, if you don’t have an agenda, theirs will do. . . .

If you don’t come to the table, you run the risk of finding yourself on the menu. The single salary schedule that we now have is indeed on its way out. And it should be replaced, or at least amended, in important ways.

Monty Neill, executive director of FairTest, a national advocacy group exposing the misuse of standardized testing:

If it’s merit pay or performance pay and it’s a bad idea based on the history of its use or its use in other areas, then it’s a bad idea and should be rejected and you’re not required to have an alternative. . . . Coming out of the Duncan Department of Ed is the assumption that this differential pay or other variations is going to improve learning outcomes. We don’t know that.

We are being asked to make all these changes with no evidence that it is going to improve student learning, which, according to Duncan, is the point of it all.

Mark Simon, former president of the Montgomery County Education Association and currently with the Tom Mooney Institute for Teacher and Union Leadership:

I think that people who are worried and upset that Obama’s policies aren’t changing enough [from the Bush administration], they have a right. They have a basis. But I think the flip side is also right, because Obama and Duncan have really taken to heart the phrase, we want to do it with you, not to you. . . .

There is a sufficient degree of openness on the details that teacher unions and other organizations that represent

teachers need to jump in with ideas and pilot projects. This is the moment for educators to not just be part of the conversation, but to drive the conversation. Shame on us if we don’t.

Henry Giroux, a professor at McMaster University in Canada and a leading educational theoretician, in a commentary July 24 on the TruthOut website:

Arne Duncan, by any educational standard, is a hardwired disciple of free-market ideology, who largely views schools as a business and defines educational reform within the language of market-driven values and social relations. . . . In fact, his language largely echoes the conservative market-driven values of both the Bush administration and the chamber of commerce. . . . Obama and Duncan want to treat teachers as low-skilled factory workers by creating market-based notions of reward and competitiveness.

What’s the Plan?

Bill Raabe, director of collective bargaining and member advocacy for the NEA, has experience with differentiated pay structures across the country. “When I talk to my members, I say, ‘Don’t focus on the words so much as what’s underneath them.’”

Raabe advises that educators ask, first and foremost, what is the purpose of proposed changes in the pay structure. To place experienced teachers in hard-to-staff schools? To attract and retain younger teachers? To promote new forms of professional development? To nurture mentor teachers and help them share their expertise? Or, as was true with many traditional merit pay proposals, to more easily blame teachers for the failures of public education by fostering the assumption that teachers would do a better job if

'This is the moment for educators to not just be part of the conversation, but to drive the conversation.

Shame on us if we don't.'

—Mark Simon, Mooney Institute for Teacher and Union Leadership

they competed against each other in order to win merit bonuses?

The NEA advocates that any proposed change in pay structure must answer three basic questions: What is going to be measured? How is it going to be measured? Is there a sustainable source of money to pay for it?

The complexity of negotiations is underscored by the fact that there isn't even agreement on what to call the various plans being discussed. Even the most common term among educators, performance pay, grates on many ("It makes me feel like a circus animal," said one union activist).

"My favorite term is differentiated pay, with the differentiation on grounds that are both plausible and credible to teachers," says Urbanski, whose Rochester union has more than two decades of experience with negotiating contracts outside the traditional pay structure. At this point, according to Urbanski, the district has four tiers of teachers, each with differing salary ranges and obligations: intern, resident, professional, and lead teacher.

Much of the impetus for re-examining the pay structure has come from noneducators, in particular politicians and the business community. But within teaching, younger teachers are more open to looking at changing the pay structure. At a time when teacher retention is a growing problem, it is hard to attract and retain young people who feel the current structures are unfair because they have to wait 20 years to reach the same pay scale as the burned-out teacher down the hall. What's more, if they move to another district, they often lose their seniority-based pay.

Jim Carlson, a regional staffer for the Wisconsin Education Association Council and a founder of the Educator Compensation Institute, helped develop a union-supported proposal in Wis-

consin called A-PATH (Accomplished Teaching Pathways). Carlson says he is "absolutely convinced" that differentiated compensation is an issue whose time has come:

"We need to allow a broader, more systemic view of teacher compensation that is designed to accomplish four primary objectives: attract quality teachers; retain them; improve and enhance their teaching skills once they are there; and, finally, to add to the collective body of knowledge of what constitutes effective teaching practices."

Carlson and Urbanski are representative of a new breed of teacher union and labor advocates who have been operating under the radar screen of a media preoccupied with headlines about failing urban schools, lemon teachers, abysmal test scores, and the much-needed stick of merit pay. But, they stress, for every potentially useful change in pay structure that is done in collaboration with teachers under the rubric of the union contract, there are horror stories of misguided measures imposed from the top and driven by test scores. Younger teachers may be open to new ideas, but veteran teachers are rightfully suspicious of tampering with their pay in an era of economic uncertainty and budget cutbacks.

There are any number of merit pay horror stories. Take Florida, where the legislature has come up with four different plans in seven years.

"Florida is the poster child of how to do alternative pay the wrong way," notes Carlson. "They made every mistake you could think of."

There was no teacher involvement in the program's creation or implementation, and no attempt to gather data on whether the program met its goals. Additional pay was limited to a minority percentage of teachers, merit was determined largely by standardized test scores, districts had little ability

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to modify the program, and the pot of money was predetermined—so if more teachers became eligible, they received a smaller amount of money.

Even in recent reincarnations, the plan has been criticized as an expensive failure. An investigation last year by the *St. Petersburg Times*, for instance, found that about three-quarters of the nearly 5,000 teachers who received merit pay in Hillsborough County worked at more affluent schools, and

‘Coming out of the Duncan Department of Ed is the assumption that this differential pay or other variations is going to improve learning outcomes. We don’t know that.’

—Monty Neill, executive director of FairTest

only 3 percent worked in low-income schools. The program was so poorly conceived that 60 of Florida’s 67 school districts refused to participate, even though it held the promise of more money for the district. As the *St. Petersburg Times* editorialized after its investigation, “The biggest obstacle to performance pay in Florida schools is not the unions. It’s the ham-handed attempts by lawmakers and DOE [Department of Education] to dictate how teachers must be judged.”

Beyond the Florida Fiasco

It’s easy to develop a performance pay plan that will distort the curriculum and enrage teachers. The more difficult question is whether and how to modify the traditional pay structure in a way that has the potential to promote better teaching, improve teacher pay, and give teachers control, via the union contract, of the program’s implementation.

Nor should differentiated pay be a substitute for demanding decent minimum pay for all teachers. A 2007 study by the international management consultant firm McKinsey & Company found that starting teacher salaries in the United States are far below the international norm. In South Korea and Germany, starting salaries were about 141 percent of per capita GDP. The figure for the United States was only 81 percent, the lowest of the 10 countries surveyed. A report from the Economic Policy Institute last year found that when teachers are compared to professionals in occupations with comparable education levels and skills (accountants, registered nurses, computer programmers), teachers’ weekly earnings were, on average, almost 15 percent less.

Although the media promotes the view that teacher unions are inflexibly opposed to modifying the traditional

pay structure, both the AFT and NEA have been involved in local initiatives that differentiate teacher pay. Nor are teachers as a group opposed to discussing changes. A 2008 national survey by the AFT found that teachers would support additional compensation for reasons such as additional responsibilities (85 percent), high evaluations by administrators and other teachers (58 percent), and gains in student achievement as measured by portfolios, projects, and other nonstandardized test results (53 percent). Some 88 percent favored giving additional pay to teachers working in a hard-to-staff school. The teachers’ biggest concerns were that changes would be unfair to teachers in classes and schools with the most difficult students to teach (49 percent), and that salaries would be tied to test scores rather than to teaching children (36 percent).

It’s not surprising that teachers would be concerned about pay plans that are too rigidly tied to standardized test scores. Such fears are borne out by the history of merit pay, by the media and business community’s fascination with test scores, with the growing emphasis in this digitalized world on “data,” and with misperceptions that surround differentiated pay plans that go far beyond test scores. Take the case of Denver.

Cases in Point: Denver and Minneapolis

Generally seen as the most developed differentiated pay plan in any major district, Denver’s plan is a complicated, union-bargained system that was implemented only after a union-supported pilot program. “There is a great deal about Denver’s plan that is terrific,” argues Carlson, who was a consultant with the pilot program. “But people always focus on a very tiny part, which is the bonus tied to test

scores, which is only less than 1 percent of the total compensation system. I get frustrated because the merit pay stuff, even though it’s a small amount, is extremely sexy to the media.”

NEA leader Brilliant argues that the Denver pay structure, whether it is ultimately deemed a success or failure, is a model in how the issue was approached and negotiated. “They took a lot of time, involved a lot of people, practiced before they made it mandatory, and went out and found the money,” she says.

As with any contract-negotiated change in pay, the Denver plan is complicated. The NEA website describes it this way:

In 2005, Denver became the first big city school system to buy into pay-for-performance with a complex system called “ProComp.” Teacher approval was contingent on voters passing a \$25 million tax increase, enough for an average of \$6,000 per teacher.

The plan was bargained, not imposed, after a union-management pilot project. It is optional for teachers already in the system, mandatory for new hires. It replaces the old salary schedule. There are no seniority steps. The extra money goes to individuals, but there’s no limit on how many teachers can get raises at a school, so colleagues are not competing. The biggest raises are for graduate degrees and extra courses. Teachers can also qualify for more money by getting good evaluations from principals, by working in schools or fields in which there is a shortage of candidates, and for helping their students meet test score goals. Test score goals are not one-size-fits-all. They are negotiated, case-by-case, between teachers and principals.

Brad Jupp, who served six years as a union representative and teacher lead-

Does the Private Sector ‘Pay for Performance’?

One of the persistent arguments in support of pay for performance is that the private sector successfully uses merit pay to reward and/or fire workers, so why should teachers be exempt from this proven strategy?

Consider this recent statement by Theodore Hershberg, a University of Pennsylvania professor and executive director of Operation Public Education in Philadelphia: “The whole society is based on merit. Why is public education the only place where we don’t give a damn if you’re any good?”

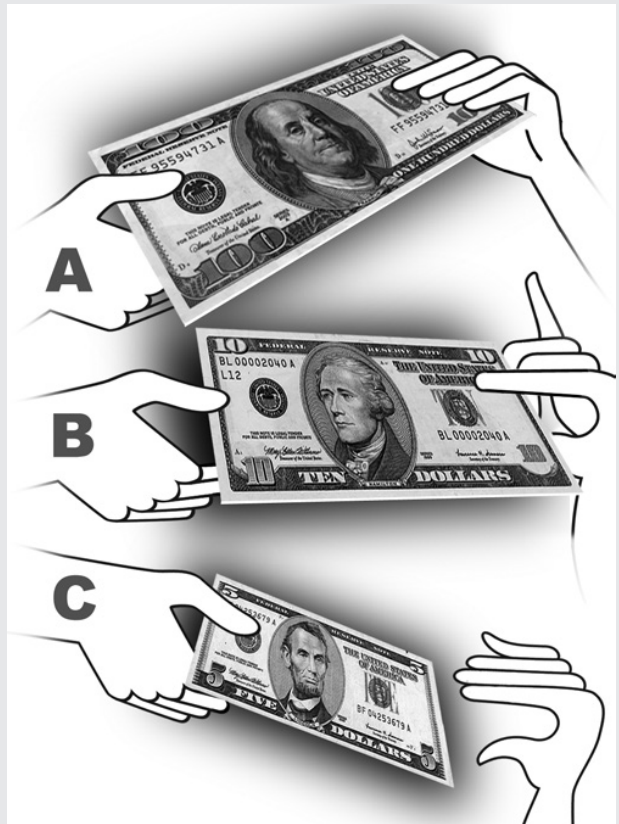
Or the view by billionaire and education philanthropist Eli Broad, that he “could not think of any other profession [besides teaching] that does not have any rewards for excellence.”

It turns out, however, that such assumptions are simplistic—and wrong.

A study released in May by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), “Teachers, Performance Pay, and Accountability,” found that “relatively few private sector workers have pay that varies in a direct, formulaic way with their productivity, and that the share of such workers is probably declining.”

The EPI study on the private sector and performance pay is not a quick read—it’s 118 pages, and incorporates a variety of studies with differing definitions of performance pay. Its section on education refers primarily to plans driven by standardized test results, and thus some might argue it does not encompass the range of proposals in local districts throughout the country. Overall, however, the study is a much-needed collection of data on performance pay in the private sector and what lessons there might be for public education.

Performance pay now covers only about one in seven



MICHAEL DUFFY

workers and accounts for only a small part of their pay, according to the report.

There is only one sector where performance pay structures are increasing: According to the study, expansion in performance pay in the private sector “is largely a non-union, male phenomenon concentrated among managers and professionals and in finance, insurance, and real estate.”

—BARBARA MINER

er to help create the Denver plan (and who recently joined Duncan’s Department of Education), has co-authored a book on it. In a chapter titled “Adapt or Die?” the authors explain that they wrote the book in part “to encourage other districts, states, and unions to give alternative forms of teacher compensation a try, to convince them that it is not like eating glass—at least most of the time—and that many of the obstacles can be overcome by simply refusing to give up on an idea whose time has come.”

Although Denver is the most widely known differentiated pay structure

negotiated in collaboration with the union, labor advocates often cite other examples, from Rochester, N.Y., to Manitowoc, Wis., to Minneapolis.

As in Denver, the Minneapolis plan developed over a decade and currently has four different categories in which people can increase their pay: education, professional development, professional leadership, and professional responsibility. In June 2006, teachers voted for the Alternative Teacher Professional Pay System, with additional votes of support in subsequent years. Under the plan, individual teachers have the choice whether to move to a

new salary schedule or stay with the traditional salary package. At this point, most teachers have moved to the alternative pay plan, according to Louise Sundin, a founder of the Teacher Union Reform Network who was a national vice president of the AFT for 25 years and served 22 years as president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers.

Sundin argues that, done right, differentiated pay addresses not only questions of teachers receiving the money they deserve, but also is an important tool to reshape professional development in a district. “If you are

going to pay teachers for professional development, it then needs to go through the pay process and collective bargaining," she says. "If teachers are smart, they are in control of that entire plan. So it wrests some of the power away from the district and helps put it collaboratively in the hands of the union and district."

Sundin says she "absolutely" believes we are in a new era and that there is an opportunity to counter the overarching influence of standardized tests on education reform. "The people who are involved in the new direction of the Education Department are people who I think understand how destructive the punishment part of AYP [adequate yearly progress] was. You'll notice that they don't use the term NCLB anymore, and are going back to ESEA," she said, referring to the original name of federal involvement in K-12 schools, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which dates back to the Johnson administration and its War on Poverty in the 1960s.

A number of other union activists are more cautious about the Obama administration's direction on education, and stress the importance of holding Duncan and Obama to their oft-repeated statements that they want to do reform "with" teachers and not "to" them. "We need to develop a strategy of beating them at their own game," argues Simon. "That's the best approach, and it's an opportunity for unions to step up to the plate."

By the time school doors opened in September, concerns about the Obama education policies had increased, based on everything from Duncan's history in Chicago, to appointments to the Department of Education of non-educators with a pro-testing mind-set, to the initial guidelines for Race to the Top funds.

"It's true that Obama and Duncan are not using the term NCLB, because they have agreed that the name is toxic," notes Neill. "The question is, will they change the substance? . . . I would argue that this [the Obama/Duncan Race to the Top initiative] is a major push to tie teacher salary and evaluation in some form to student test scores. That is the overarching context; it is very problematic and is essentially a bad idea."

But, one might argue, the Obama/Duncan train has left the station, whether one likes it or not. "Every time someone says, 'We can't stop the train,' it increases the likelihood that the train won't be stopped," Neill counters. "If it's a train down a bad track, that's bad news."

Urbanski takes a different approach. If the train is going in a bad direction, he says, "let's get into one of the cars in the train and make it a whole lot better than the rest of the train. So that at least the Obama administration would have a choice. Right now they are largely proceeding on a path of their own because of lack of alternatives from teachers and unions."

Clearly, there are strong differences on how to respond to differentiated pay, especially given the controversies over the Obama/Duncan proposals. But that doesn't bother Urbanski. "It's OK to argue about important things, and this is important. It's only a problem when you argue about petty things."

"I think we want the same thing," he continues, noting agreement among progressive activists about the need for reforming public schools, and the importance of respecting and supporting both teachers and students and treating them as more than standardized-test robots. "We are arguing about how to get there." ■

Cincinnati's Teacher Union Tackles Quality

Despite complexities and shortcomings, the district's teacher quality initiatives are making a difference

■ BY BARBARA MINER

CINCINNATI, OHIO

Sue Taylor, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (CFT), started teaching more than 25 years ago. Sent to teach three different classes at three different grade levels in junior high, she needed to become an immediate expert not only in classroom management, but in Ohio history, U.S. history, and “careers.” Before long, she was sinking fast.

“I told my principal, who was a band teacher, that I really needed help, so he came to visit my classroom,” Taylor recalls. “His only suggestion was, ‘Did you hear that guy tapping his pencil in the back of the room? Do something about that.’”

“The memories of that first year, and how impossible it was, are so vivid and fresh,” she continues. “I would never want any teacher not to have structured, automatic, built-in help from a peer who is an expert in that grade level and content.”

Such help is now the norm in Cincinnati, where every new hire is assigned a mentor from the appropriate

content area. And that’s only one small part of an interrelated network of teacher quality initiatives run collaboratively by the union and administration in this district of 36,000 students.

Mark Twain is said to have quipped, “When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Cincinnati because it’s always 20 years behind the times.” Even today, the city evokes memories of an era of 19th- and early 20th-century industry, with steamboats puffing up and down the Ohio River.

But Cincinnati—along with other Ohio districts such as Toledo and Columbus and a handful of districts nationwide such as Rochester, N.Y., Minneapolis, and Denver—has garnered a reputation for innovation and the union’s willingness to go beyond the norm. Cincinnati’s initiatives even encroach on areas traditionally held to be the exclusive purview of management, such as an evaluation system that can, among other things, affect salary, advancement, and continued employment.

“We do a lot of things that other teacher unions would find very radical or very risky,” Taylor says, citing as an example how a veteran teacher’s salary can be frozen if he or she is not making expected progress in their evaluations.

“We not only didn’t fight that, we probably crafted it,” she jokes.

Taylor admits the initiatives are controversial, complicated, and contradictory. But she believes the union has the responsibility to immerse itself in issues of teacher quality, despite the inherent problems. “The union needs to be concerned about the rights and working conditions of teachers, but it also needs to be the impetus for professionalizing teaching,” she says.

National Political Context

As No Child Left Behind (NCLB) continues, many of its supporters are arguing there needs to be more focus on teacher quality, and their arguments are sometimes accompanied by thinly veiled threats of a clampdown. And these threats are not coming from just the usual suspects of conservative foundations and think tanks. As *The New York Times* editorialized Oct. 22, following less than hoped-for progress on math and reading scores as measured by this year’s National Assessment of Educational Progress, “The next level of progress will require deeper systemic change, especially in the realm of teacher quality. . . . That will mean hard work and more money—and a direct confrontation with the politically explo-

Barbara Miner (barbaraminer@ameritech.net), a Milwaukee-based journalist, is a Rethinking Schools columnist.



MICHAEL DUFFY

There is little doubt that teacher unions, already under attack by conservatives, will become enmeshed in these confrontations. The question is not so much if unions will have to address teacher quality, but why and how.

sive issue of teacher preparedness.”

There is little doubt that teacher unions, already under attack by conservatives, will become enmeshed in these confrontations. The question is not so much *if* unions will have to address teacher quality, but why and how.

One answer to “why” is because teacher unions can be well equipped to do so by virtue of their day-to-day interaction with teachers and the resources they can marshal to develop programs and collaborate on a districtwide level.

Equally important, the alternative is far less pleasant. “We have to address the quality issues or other people—be they mayors, or governors, or whoever—will impose their reforms on us,” argues Tom Mooney, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers and a former president of the Cincinnati union (see interview p. 34). “And it will probably be in ways we will not like and that will not help students.”

The answer to “how” will depend in part on the local context: Who is leading the initiatives? What are the relations between the union and administration? And are the initiatives a smokescreen for privatization and the de-skilling of the teaching profession?

One factor is so obvious it might be forgotten. How will rank-and-file teachers be involved?

The Cincinnati Initiatives

Twenty years ago, Cincinnati pioneered the first of its teacher quality initiatives, Peer Assistance and Evaluation, a joint collaboration between the union and the administration. Under the program, fellow teachers are trained to evaluate and mentor other classroom teachers. The philosophy that underlies this is that teachers are in touch with classroom realities. And because the peer evaluators work with teachers with similar accreditation, they have a strong

background in a teacher’s content area.

A few years later, the union and administration added a Career in Teaching program for teacher advancement. One of its main goals was to provide career and financial incentives to keep good teachers in the classroom rather than have them leave and go into administration.

Five years ago, Cincinnati unveiled a new and comprehensive Teacher Evaluation System (TES), which covers all new employees and ultimately will be used to evaluate every teacher in the system (see article on page 32 for a more complete explanation of the various initiatives).

The peer evaluation and career in teaching programs are, at this point, well established and have become ingrained in the culture of the district. The evaluation system has had more ups and downs—including teacher uproar three years ago when a short-lived pay

Cincinnati: How the System Works

Cincinnati's teacher quality initiatives involve three separate but interrelated components:

- **Peer Assistance and Evaluation**, a 20-year-old program under which experienced teachers leave the classroom for three years to help evaluate and mentor both new and veteran teachers.
- **Career in Teaching**, a 15-year program that allows teachers to advance without leaving teaching and entering administration. Under the program, teachers agree to be evaluated to earn lead teacher status. Lead teachers become building level leaders, such as department chairs or program facilitators, and also are eligible to be hired as peer evaluators and mentors. Lead teachers have additional responsibilities, work extra days, and receive \$5,000–6,000 a year more in pay. Of about 2,700 teachers in the district, slightly more than 400 are qualified to take lead teacher positions, according to union officials.
- **Teacher Evaluation System**, uniformly referred to as TES, which is used to evaluate new and veteran teachers and also those who wish to become lead teachers or get tenure (Cincinnati does not have automatic tenure).

Both the peer assistance and career teaching programs are, at this point, firmly embedded into the culture of district. Even when they have criticisms, few question their fundamental merits. Safeguards have also been built into the system so that teachers do not use the Career in Teaching program to take a permanent hiatus from the classroom and lose touch with the day-to-day realities of teaching. For instance, evaluating and mentor teachers may hold their positions for only three years, and then have to go back into the classroom for one year, at which point they can apply again to be an evaluator.

Initially, some critics felt that teachers would be “soft” on their colleagues. Those critics were wrong, however. In the peer evaluation program's first year, for instance, 5 percent of beginning teachers were dismissed, compared to 1.6 percent of those evaluated by principals.

TES is the most complicated of the programs. Its current form was developed about five years ago and is based on the work of Charlotte Danielson, an educational consultant and author who formerly worked at the Educational Testing Service. TES attempts to make explicit what are often intuitive understandings of good teaching practices. It encompasses four teaching domains (planning and preparing for student learning; creating an environment for learning; teaching for learning; and professionalism) and 15 standards broken down into 32 elements—for example, lesson effectiveness, student engagement, family involvement, and participation at the school level. Based on a rubric, teachers receive one of four possible ratings for each element: distinguished, proficient, basic, or unsatisfactory.

Overall, the standards and elements are based on six common themes the union and administration have jointly decided are essential to good teaching: equity, cultural sensitivity, high expectations, developmental appropriateness, inclusionary practices, and appropriate use of technology. Those evaluated under TES include all new hires and all those seeking to become lead or tenured teachers; veteran teachers on a regular basis (this year it is ninth year veterans); and those placed on “intervention” or carried over into a second year because they did not pass certain evaluation areas the first year.

Teacher evaluators and administrators who receive special training conduct the evaluations, which involve at least two classroom visits. New hires and those on intervention or carried over receive six observations and ongoing assistance. Finally, teachers are also expected to reflect on their practice and, depending on the level of evaluation, provide information on matters such as grading decisions, involvement in professional activities, and examples of student work.

About 350 teachers will be evaluated under TES this year. They include new teachers, veterans, and those seeking lead teacher status. There are 16 teachers working full time on evaluations and mentoring this year, according to Sheryl Mobley-Brown, a lead teacher acting as the district's TES facilitator.

—BARBARA MINER

for performance component nearly sunk the entire evaluation system. More than 96 percent of union members voted in 2002 against continuing and expanding the “pay for performance” experiment under which teachers, especially veteran teachers, could have had their pay cut if they did not meet expected scores on their evaluations.

Few teachers seem unhappy that pay for performance is dead. But the other initiatives continued, and the union-administration collaboration survived. Today, new questions are on the table, especially how to link evaluation with the teaching models and professional development needed to help improve teaching.

“The potential is there to make the evaluation more of a learning experience,” says Diana Porter, a classroom teacher currently working part time for the union on teacher quality issues. “Too often, some in the administration view evaluation with a ‘gotcha’ mentality, trying to catch teachers rather than help them improve.”

Porter says that, for her, the most immediate task is to make the evaluation system far less complicated and far more helpful to teachers. “We are working to get it to a point where the average teacher can understand the evaluation system, embrace it, and make it a part of their good teaching practices without being frustrated,” she says. “We're not there yet. This is still a work in progress.”

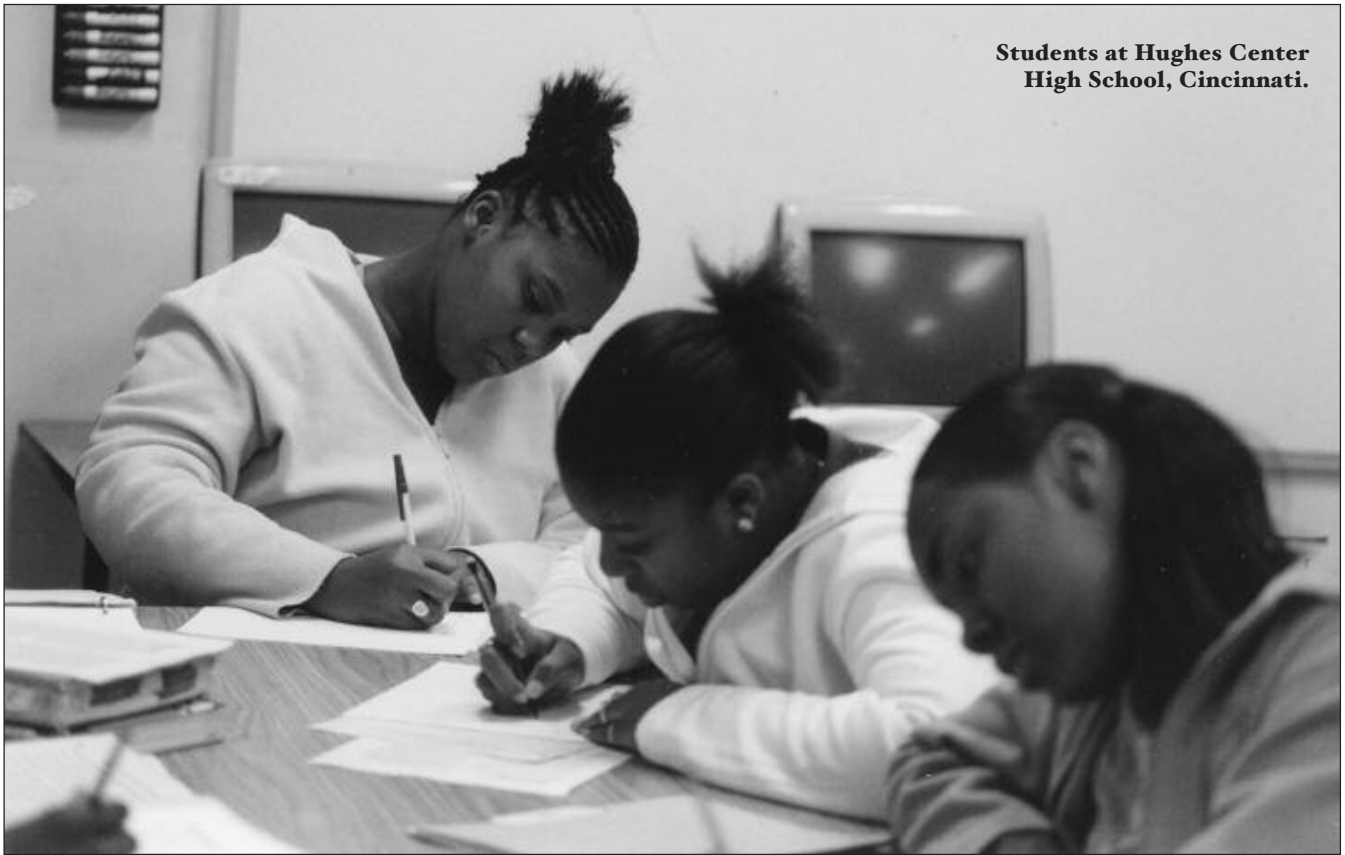
The Teacher Perspective

It's Monday morning, not even 9 a.m., and already English teacher Jaime Beirne feels behind.

Beirne teaches at Hughes Center High School and is part of a four-subject team teaching ninth graders at one of the five small academies within the building. His Team B already has had two parent conferences and a special ed evaluation that morning, and is planning the week's priorities, including helping students adjust to a new schedule that week. Beirne just turned 50 and got his first pair of bifocals over the weekend. His brain feels off kilter, his attention is on his soon-to-begin class—and this reporter is pestering him to quickly summarize the strengths and weaknesses of Cincinnati's teacher evaluation initiatives.

Beirne, a former advertising account executive and copywriter who took up teaching five years ago as a second career, barely misses a step. “The most

Students at Hughes Center High School, Cincinnati.



BARBARA MINER

If the Cincinnati initiatives are to fulfill their promise of improving teacher quality and making teaching a more attractive long-term profession, they must move beyond evaluating to actually modeling best practices.

obvious strength is that you have teacher input into decision-making and leadership, with a real teacher perspective,” he says in a soft Southern twang with the soothing cadence of a late-night DJ.

“It takes you about two minutes to forget the realities of the classroom. I’ve been there, I know,” he continues, explaining that for three years he had been a lead teacher with out-of-classroom responsibilities that limited his teaching to half time. “The first year I went back to a full load, I was shocked.”

Lead teachers are part of a Cincinnati program under which extra pay is given to distinguished teachers who take on additional responsibilities. In order to become a lead teacher, one has to receive especially high scores on the district’s Teacher Evaluation System (TES).

Of the three other teachers on Beirne’s Team B, one other is a lead teacher, one tried but didn’t receive sufficient scores, and the fourth is undergoing the evaluation this year.

James Stallworth, 33, left pre-med as an undergrad to go into teaching and is the math teacher on Team B. A burly man with distinguished looking dreadlocks draping to his shoulder blades, he speaks passionately about the need for American youth, especially for African-American females, to shed their fear of math.

Stallworth admits he enjoys the messiness of young minds grappling with complicated problems. He doesn’t obsess about student mistakes in the early stages of a lesson as long as the students are thinking and working hard. Perhaps most important, he wants his students “to overcome their math pho-

bias and learn to appreciate the beauty of math.”

“I can’t make everyone love math,” he says. “But I can help them to stop hating it.”

Several years ago, Stallworth tried to become a lead teacher, but he did not score sufficiently high in all necessary categories.

“Am I a little bitter?” he asks. “Yes.”

Stallworth wonders if his comfort level with a more-chaotic-than-usual learning and teaching style—and the fact that evaluators often get a snapshot rather than a complete picture of a teacher’s ability—may have been factors. But he was also frustrated because he was never sure what the evaluators wanted. “I think that if I had known exactly what they were looking for, I could have been better prepared,” he says.

An Interview with Tom Mooney

Tom Mooney, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers, has long been in the forefront of unionists advocating a more activist approach to union involvement in issues of teacher quality. Mooney is also a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and until recently chaired the AFT's policy council on teacher issues. A founding member of the Teacher Union Reform Network, he is a member of a newly formed offshoot group, the Institute for Teacher Union Leadership. He is also a member of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and a past member of the board of directors of the Holmes Partnership for Teacher Education Reform. The following is condensed from an interview with Barbara Miner.

RS: What is the role of teacher unions in ensuring teacher quality?

Mooney: Teacher unions ought to lead the way in terms of raising standards for getting into and staying in teaching, for strengthening student achievement, and for boosting public confidence in our public schools. Other than the unions—the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers—there are no organizations that represent the overall teaching profession. We have to address the quality issues or other people—be they mayors, or governors, or whoever—will impose their reforms on us. And it will probably be in ways we will not like and that will not help students.

RS: Has there been progress on local unions taking up the issue of teacher quality?

Mooney: It hasn't grown as fast or as widely as some of us had hoped. I don't understand why. Most—if not all—local unions will push for more of a say in decisions about instructional policies and practices. But that doesn't go far enough. I will stop a hair short of saying that peer review is indispensable as a foundation for other professional advances. But if you don't bite that bullet, how can you persuasively argue for a significantly increased role for teachers in other educational decisions?

To be honest, I don't think there is a problem with the rank and file. The problem sometimes is with union leaders. I don't mean this as a blast, but we inherited and imitated industrial unionism. Why? It was powerful and we were looking for power to counter the bureaucracy and to stop being powerless. That model served us very well in stage one of teacher unionism.

RS: What about pay for performance measures that are tied to scores on tests?

Mooney: There are two raging but separate debates. First, I think it's absolutely pointless to be knee-jerk anti-testing and say that we cannot measure what we do or the results of what we do. That's just not a viable position. Sometimes, people on the American left have made the mistake of continuing the 1960s philosophy of "Don't tell me what to teach because I don't want to teach the crap in that textbook." That fight for the right to "do your own thing" has carried into an era where that's not the issue. It's time for some of us to give up our countercultural views on these things. I know that's strong. And it doesn't mean all these tests are great. And certainly, politicians need to be more realistic about how reliable these tests are. But we have to focus more on making sure students have the skills they need for further education.

There has to be some acknowledgement of accountability: What do we want kids to learn? And how are we going to measure what we are doing?

But then there's the question of whether we evaluate—much less pay—teachers on the basis of these tests. And I say, on an individual basis, absolutely not. It's indefensible. On a schoolwide basis, I think that's an interesting idea worth exploring.

RS: Which aspects are worth exploring and which aren't?

Mooney: There are different kinds of pay for performance, and I am putting several conditions on the "yes" or "maybe" I just gave. It's got to be about improvement, not an absolute standard, otherwise it's a rigged game. Second, it has to be schoolwide results, because you really want to incant everybody to be rowing in the same direction. It really does take everyone working together to improve a school.

Finally, there has to be more humility from politicians about the validity and proven viability of these tests. If you start linking people's individual and family livelihood to tests that were invented yesterday and will be changed tomorrow, you will drive more people out of the profession.

The bottom line is, if we want to have kids succeed, we have to be willing to take part in the debates about standards and norms for the profession. We don't have the luxury of ignoring them.

It's a common criticism. In various conversations with the members of Team B—sometimes one-on-one, sometimes in groups of two or three, and briefly with all four—two overriding messages emerged. First, if the Cincinnati initiatives are to fulfill their promise of improving teacher quality and making teaching a more attractive long-term profession, they must move beyond evaluating to actually modeling best practices and enhancing professional development. Second, that mod-

eling and professional development must become so strong that the culture of teaching is transformed.

Allen Frecker, Team B's history and social studies teacher, says that currently the evaluation system is like a test in which the teachers are never taught the right answers. "The real problem is that it is not using good teaching practices to teach teachers what they need to know," says Frecker, a 32-year-old teacher whose highly organized style is far different from Stallworth's but whose critique of

TES is not dissimilar.

There are lovely worded rubrics, Frecker notes, "but no exemplars, no lessons connected to them. If a teacher took that approach in front of students, you would fail evaluation."

Union and administration officials admit that this issue is rising to the surface of the district's agenda. "We've said what we think the best teacher looks like," notes the CFT's Porter. "Now we have to help the teacher get there."

Does Improved Teacher Quality Lead to Improved Student Learning?

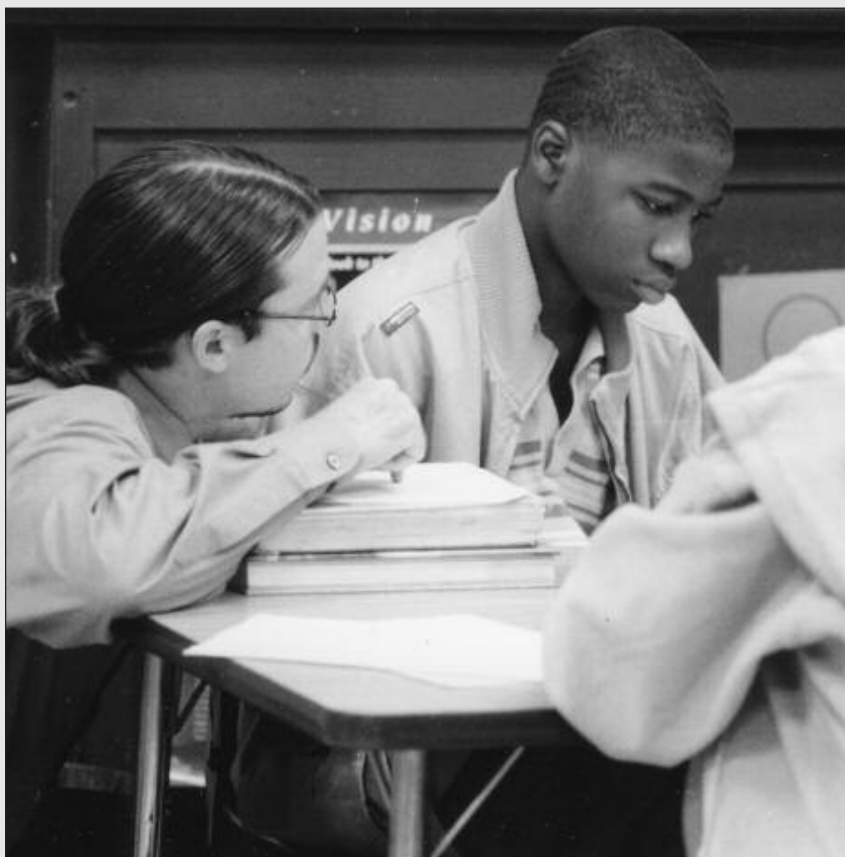
Such a question is inherently tricky, in part because measures of student learning are multi-faceted and embrace not only academic questions but matters of social development and civic awareness.

Union and district officials say that, based on at least one narrow gauge, student proficiency tests, Cincinnati's teacher evaluation system appears to correlate with improved teaching. A 2002 study found that teachers who rated highest under Cincinnati's evaluation also showed the greatest gains on average in students' proficiency tests. Conversely, teachers with low ratings showed the fewest gains on their students' scores. The district looked at individual students' scores on proficiency tests in 2000 and 2001, comparing student improvement to the teachers' evaluation ratings.

The report was based on grades 3 through 8. High school proficiency tests were not measured because they may be taken multiple times over several grades, making comparisons difficult.

More recent data show that in the higher grades Cincinnati is outperforming districts with similar demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic factors in higher grades.

Information from the 2004-05 Ohio Report Cards shows that even though Cincinnati underperformed similar districts in third and fourth grade, by fifth grade its students had caught up and in subsequent years they outperformed students in similar districts.



BARBARA MINER

On Ohio's eighth-grade achievement and 10th-grade graduation test in 2004-05, Cincinnati scored well above similar districts in the five areas tested—reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. In addition, its 2003-04 graduation rate of 72.1 percent was significantly higher than the 64.2 percent rate for similar districts.

—BARBARA MINER

Then there is the issue of changing the culture of teaching—of making sure that slogans such as “high standards for all” are more than hollow rhetoric. Can the Cincinnati initiatives do that? So far the answer seems to be, maybe.

Sandra Wetzel, the fourth member of Team B, is also a second-career teacher. A 54-year-old former insurance worker who graduated from college 10 years ago, becoming a teacher “was the fulfillment of a dream.”

Although she has reservations—mostly she is anxious and scared—Wetzel volunteered this year to be evaluated in the hopes of becoming a lead

teacher. She believes there is “a lot of value” in the evaluation system and that it has helped her. “It focuses on what you need to be doing and makes you aware of the finer points of good teaching,” she says.

Has it helped change the culture of teaching?

“It has changed me,” she responds. “It changes you if you are open to change.”

That change in culture, the other team members chime in, is the ultimate goal. “That’s what it [the evaluation system] should do,” Frecker says. “I don’t know if it’s done that. But it could.”

Beirne, who was involved in several committees that helped develop TES, underscores that the union and administration embarked on uncharted waters with TES. “I think we did a good job of identifying and breaking down the components of good teaching,” he says in pointing out one of the strengths of the evaluation system.

Then he pauses, searching for the right words. “Designing something in a room full of people is one thing and making that system work in the realities of classroom life is another,” he continues. “This has to be a living document that changes as we see need.” ■

The Hows and Whys of Peer Mentoring

Our peer observations were organized in a simple fashion. Every week the person being observed informed the team of what to look for when visiting. Sometimes we wanted a certain child observed. Sometimes the focus was on a curriculum matter. Other times we wanted to address issues such as methods of class management.

During the week, the three observers would separately come to the observee's classroom and take careful notes for 30 minutes. At the beginning of the following week, the team held a "debriefing" meeting and each observer recounted what they had seen. We rotated the process so that each team member was observed every month or so.

Scheduling was one of our first obstacles. We each looked carefully at our "specials" such as music, at our teaching assistant times and at lunch schedules to determine when it would be possible to leave the classroom. During a mid-winter team evaluation, we decided that 30 minutes was not enough time to observe. We solved this problem with two major adjustments. We increased our observations to 45 minutes and we chose a focus topic that the other teachers would watch for throughout the rest of the year.

Scheduling became a bit trickier but we carefully calculated ways to cover for one another. Sometimes we swapped teaching assistants, covered each others' classes at recess, or ate our lunches during observations. The administration has been supportive, although all the work to organize and institutionalize the process has fallen on our team. Our union (we are members of the American Federation of Teachers) has not really been aware of the project.

BENEFITS OF PEER MENTORING

The primary goal of the peer observation project is to rethink the way we do things and adapt to changing times, students, and circumstances. The benefits of observing went both ways. Not only did observed teachers get specific feedback but those doing the observing were exposed to an increased number of children of varying ages, learning styles, and academic, developmental, and emotional levels. All of us have benefited from seeing a variety of teaching methods and all have enhanced our "bag of tricks," so to speak.

There have also been what one might call "hidden benefits."

After a few months of observing each other, we recognized that we tended to over-prepare for the time we were observed. We wanted to impress each other and keep our "warts" hidden. As trust built, this need to appear perfect dissipated and we became more comfortable with letting down our defenses. This led to an unexpected development. Team members found that

while teaching unobserved, they helped maintain their focus by pretending that someone was observing them.

Another interesting benefit was how our colleagues acted as a "reality check." For example, one teacher said she felt as if she were always yelling at her students. The observers reported something very different. They saw a teacher who appeared to be patient and tolerant. Clearly, her own thoughts and frustration had shaded her view of her teaching. The team discussed this further and helped the teacher to focus on the reasons for her frustrations.

A third hidden benefit is that the children see their teachers practicing what they preach. We make it a point to be very open with the students about our observations and our team mentoring. In essence, we are modeling important lessons such as teamwork and learning through observation. These are the same skills we want our students to learn. Seeing their teachers struggle to improve and work with their peers is a powerful example.

NEW CHALLENGES

We are now ending our second year of peer observation and mentoring. Our peer observation work has led us to look at many issues in a new light. How, for example, might we use our experience with peer mentoring to help effect reform throughout the school and district? How do we help other teachers question their teaching practices and place learning and self-reflection at the top of their priority list? Do we simply model what we believe the role of teachers should be or do we become assertive advocates of change?

Peer mentoring has also raised broader social and political issues. Poverty, child abuse, and other societal problems constantly surface and relate to the stresses that our children face. We constantly grapple with what to do with these understandings. Do we simply concentrate on our own little classroom or do we work more aggressively with parents, health practitioners, and government officials to take a holistic view of the needs of children? What role should we play in social change movements to improve the lives of our children out of the classroom?

As we reinvent and grow as learners and teachers, we find it increasingly difficult to ignore this most critical of questions. Are teachers passive observers of the world beyond our schools, or should we work to improve the overall lives of the children we serve? And how best do we do so? ■

— Marc Osten and Eric Gidseg

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of Joanna Hess, Adrienne Maley and Michelle Burk. Their participation in our collaborative work has enriched us both.

Teachers As Learners

How Peer Mentoring Can Improve Teaching

BY MARC OSTEN AND ERIC GIDSEG

The separation of a school into clearly defined classrooms creates a culture that reinforces isolation. Teachers tend to teach in ways that they have found successful, with little feedback from others. We generally do what we think is best and silently bear our own feelings of superiority or inferiority.

It doesn't have to be this way. The two of us, along with several other colleagues from our K-3 public school in upstate New York, have embarked on a peer-observation and mentoring process that has radically changed how we teach.

One of the key issues facing the teaching profession is how best to improve the quality of teaching and to provide ways for on-going professional development. Debate has been particularly strong within the National Education Association over the issue of peer evaluation. While our process did not replace the traditional evaluation process in our school or district, we believe that it nonetheless offers insight into the potentials of peer evaluation.

Following are two separate essays on how the peer observation/mentoring process helped each of us with a specific problem we were having in the classroom. For more on the structure and philosophy of our peer observation and mentoring, see article "The Hows and Whys of Peer Mentoring," on the opposite page.

When Quiet Children Get Lost

BY MARC OSTEN

The children in my second grade classroom work together in cooperative groups. My goal is to ensure that each student pulls their weight in the group, but in a way that still nurtures the enhanced creativity and energy that can come from working together. One of the struggles in cooperative learning is finding a way to engage quiet students so that they are not overwhelmed by more dominant personalities. It takes time to

I was surprised and upset – and a little embarrassed – by what my colleagues had seen. As I listened to all the vignettes, I wondered to myself: “Where was I when this was all going on?” I had prided myself on my use of cooperative groups only to find the process in disarray.

teach the students the necessary group skills and social skills that are needed for cooperative learning.

Sounds nice in theory. In practice though, last year I found myself succumbing to the growing pressures to make sure the kids scored well on standardized testing. I started cutting time from things that I knew were central to my classroom, but which weren't essential to higher test scores.

On one level, I might have been considered a success. The reading scores in my classroom went up. But the overall social and academic environment suffered.

Even though I had not put as much time into teaching students necessary group skills, I still thrust them into cooperative groups. In essence, without ever realizing it I set them up for failure. There was more bickering at team tables. Students were less engaged in projects than in the past. Dominant students like Emma and Matt often took control of their group, were becoming impatient and bossy (the names of the children have been changed). Quieter students like Brian or Marion were uninvolved. My assumption — that quieter students would be better off in small groups — was out of sync with reality.

I went to my peer mentoring team for help. I asked that the next time they came to observe my class, they focus on two things: how the groups seemed to work overall, and specifically how my two quiet students, Brian and Marion, seemed to fare. (The three observers came while their own classes

were at an activity such as gym or music or lunch. They each came once a week, at different times, for 30-45 minutes.)

After a week of observing my class, the team confirmed my worst fears. They noticed that quieter children like Brian were totally uninvolved. In one instance Brian was seen playing with a pencil in his desk for eight minutes and Marion fell asleep for a minute on her desk. Two of the three observing teachers noted the lack of verbal contact at several groups. All three remarked that most students were focused on their individual work but rarely came together to share ideas or get help. When I asked student teams to put their “heads together” to discuss each person's progress on a task, one observer remarked that the children became very frustrated with Brian's silence.

I was surprised and upset — and a little embarrassed — by what my colleagues had seen. As I listened to all the vignettes, I wondered to myself: “Where was I when this was all going on?” I had prided myself on my use of cooperative groups only to find the process in disarray.

Fortunately, our peer process involves not just observation but mentoring. As a result, our “debriefing” session moved from observer reports to suggestions. I started to feel better.

One team member suggested I revisit my cooperative group project plans. Another reminded me to carefully structure cooperative work so kids had individual tasks

but also had to collaborate. One teacher advised me to help the quieter children by giving them specific language to use with their groups. Specifically, the teacher suggested I tape a small index card to their desk that had sentence starts such as, "I think that..., my opinion is..., or I need...."

The various suggestions stimulated a discussion that led to other ideas. One colleague mentioned that the index card idea would also be helpful with more dominant children. Sentence starts for these students might be, "What do you think. ...?" "Do you have an opinion?" In this way, the more dominant children could help inspire discussion rather than close off conversations. Another idea was to develop specific, nonverbal team roles that would help quieter students stay involved.

I returned to my classroom invigorated. I led mini-lessons and role plays so students could work with the index cards. I went back to regularly using a routine called "pairs check" in which I give each student time to ask questions and share their progress and knowledge with a teammate. I started to assign one student in each cooperative group as a "checker." This person would make sure every team is involved by confirming that each member has completed their work or has had a chance to share ideas. Finally, I started to watch things more carefully. I decided to do more direct intervention to help individuals, pairs, or teams stuck "in process."

Things improved immediately. During the role plays, students perked up and became more animated. During one role play, Brian asked, "Can I bring this index card to recess and use it on the playground?"

During a study of plants I noticed several positive outcomes. In one experiment, I observed Marion look at the index card taped to her desk and say to her partner, "I think that the seed will sprout in ten days." Months earlier she would have quietly mumbled a few words that her partner might or might not hear.

At another table, a heated discussion was taking place about what order in which to share predictions. One student yelled at another, "I want to go first."

Brian, meanwhile, had been given the nonverbal team job of "quiet captain." (In this nonverbal role, the student slowly raises then brings his or her two hands together to show teammates that they need to speak in more respectful and quieter voices.) After the student's complaint, Brian became involved and showed how he was an important member of the team by giving the non-verbal signal for quiet voices and more respect.

Matt, a verbal and often bossy student, was also finding more productive ways to work in groups. During an art project about plants, Matt's team of four students each had a very specific task. Matt was responsible for the roots while the other three students worked on the stem, leaves, and flower parts. Because each student had a very specific topic, it was virtually impossible for Matt to be domineering.

After completing their drawings, I put Matt and Brian together for "pairs check." This gave Brian a chance to gain confidence in his verbal presentation before sharing his drawing with the whole class.

Early in the school year, it had been unimaginable for Brian to stand up in front of the class and present work he completed by himself. On this special day, he sat excitedly and waited patiently for Matt to finish explaining how his sunflower roots draw water from the ground. Brian then got up and in a proud and clear voice made his presentation about a sunflower's stem. It was a breakthrough moment for him.

During the year, the team helped me improve my teaching in other areas beyond cooperative groups. For example, I received specific suggestions on improving my technique with small reading groups. The team also helped me increase my use of open-ended questions and gave specific recommendations about handling a student with discipline problems.

The bottom line was that my students benefited. By becoming a learner, I had become a better teacher. ■

Marc Osten has taught 2nd and 3rd grade for several years. Previous to working in education, he worked on consumer and environmental protection concerns for national and international organizations.

When Good Intentions Go Awry

BY ERIC GIDSEG

Peer observations often provide insights that are quite painful to hear but which can improve our teaching. I learned this the hard way.

In my class of 21 kindergartners, there was a child whom I felt was unreachable in the context of whole class or group activities. I asked the team to help me out.

I use a large group setting, what I call my morning circle, as the primary teaching modality in my classroom. After the large group, the children go to "center" activities which provide an opportunity for practice and exploration. Since this child was apparently getting little from our morning circle, her entire morning was affected. She moved through centers with little understanding or direction.

As we sat together on the rug each day to hear stories and discuss current explorations, this little girl (whom I will call Jennifer), often sat on the periphery. She would look down at her hands and generally appeared lost in her own inner world.

Jennifer was a child who carried a lot of emotional baggage, and her home life was troubled and unstable. She was generally unable or unwilling to participate in classroom activities, especially verbal ones. When things became stressful for her, she would "act in," crossing her arms across her chest and making a sour face. I felt on the verge of giving up with Jennifer. All my attempts to get her to participate had failed. To some extent, I had allowed myself to give less thought to her. Just as she had banished herself from the center of the class, so had I pushed her to the periphery of my awareness.



Students in Marc Osten's class.

I knew I needed help. I hoped that my peers had experience with children who were as reticent as Jennifer and might have concrete suggestions. What I received from my team was quite shocking and caused me to look at my own failures and to re-examine my teaching.

During the observations, my peers noted that although Jennifer was passive and seemingly inattentive for much of the time, there were several brief moments where Jennifer had tried to make contact. But I had failed to recognize her attempts. For example, at one point I had been reading a book to the class. One peer observer later reported that Jennifer quietly said during the reading, "Guess what, Mr. Gidseg?" But I apparently didn't hear her, or at least didn't respond.

I asked myself, "How could I have missed such an event?" Jennifer had made a significant step outwards and I had failed to recognize it. I then asked myself, "How long had she been reaching out only to find herself ignored by me?" The peer observer went on to report that Jennifer approached me later, apparently to ask me something. I did not recognize this and instead I spoke to her. I asked her to be my special helper at our listening center. She crossed her arms and moved angrily away from me. I remembered the incident. At the time, I was mystified by Jennifer's behavior.

At the debriefing, my reaction was visceral. I buried my head in my hands and said, "This is like a knife in my heart." It's still painful for me to watch the tape of my debriefing. My colleagues were tremendously supportive, as always. My teammate who watched me miss opportunities with Jennifer told me that as he watched these events, he knew that they would be painful for me to hear. Another observer expressed that Jennifer was careful not to let even her reaching out become too obvious.

I received many ideas from my peers about how to help Jennifer. These ranged from being sure that she sat in front of me during our morning circle time to privately meeting with Jennifer before or after our circle to be sure that she received enough direction to do productive work for the day.

As I had time to process the feelings, observations, and ideas that were generated from my debriefing, I realized that the significant information that I received was the recognition that Jennifer was, in fact, reaching out. It was now up to me to be attentive to her as much as possible.

I resolved to have her near me as much as possible, to not allow her to become part of the periphery. I created small time frames where she and I could chat, in private, about the work for the

day. The changes were remarkable in a short period of time. Not only was I giving more attention to the details of her behavior, I also found more room in my heart for her. The team had helped me to see her in a new light.

There was a lot going on inside of Jennifer and I was determined to reach her. As she became more tuned in to the workings of the class, she began to make friends. She suddenly found herself to be fairly popular. Her self esteem was given quite a boost.

Jennifer's relationship with me also improved. She began talking to me each morning, little bits at first. She spoke about her family and her friends. On one occasion she brought pictures for me that she made at home. She quickly started to ask questions and enjoyed reading books with me. She had begun to learn. She was able, for the first time, to write her name correctly. Jennifer maintained her reticence towards "performing" in front of the class, but she was no longer afraid to speak.

As a veteran teacher with 20 years of early childhood experience, I was humbled by the effect that the team had on my awareness and teaching. Through their supportive critique, my eyes were opened to some of my own blind spots. And Jennifer was the fortunate recipient of a more enlightened approach from a newly revitalized teacher. ■

Eric Gidseg has taught kindergarten and first grade for 20 years. For 11 years he taught kindergarten in faculty administered Waldorf schools, where he first discovered the potential of professional development.

Teachers Teaching Teachers

In Portland, teachers work together to create teacher-centered professional development

■ BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN

Teachers teaching teachers is like the blind leading the blind,” a literacy “expert” told senior Portland Public Schools (PPS) administrators in the fall of 2005, while discussing my three-year writing proposal, which included classroom teachers sharing strategies and lessons to improve writing in Portland’s elementary schools. Instead, elementary teachers will get yet another outside expert with a program and a large price tag.

During my seven years as a curriculum specialist designing professional development in Portland Public Schools, I wanted teachers to see themselves as curriculum producers, as creative intellectuals rather than technicians serving out daily portions of someone else’s packaged or downloaded materials. I attempted to create spaces where teachers could work together to develop their own curriculum and discuss education issues.

School districts write mission statements about creating citizens of the world, but more and more, they want teachers to become robotic hands who deliver education programs designed and shipped from sites outside of our classrooms.

If we want an educated citizenry, we need teachers who know how to think about their students’ needs and write

their own curriculum in community with others.

In recent years, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has pushed administrators to grab quick solutions to get a fast “bump” in their test scores. Instead of taking the time to build teacher capacity by improving instruction or creating schools as learning communities where teachers have opportunities to have honest discussions about classroom practice, share successful lessons and strategies, or examine student work together, more and more administrators opt for what I call “boxed” professional development—from fill-in-the-blank writing curricula to “stick-the-kid-on-the-computer” reading and math programs.

When high school language arts teachers in Portland were asked by the Professional Development Committee—a group founded by the school district and the Portland Association of Teachers—which professional development programs had the greatest impact on their students’ learning, they overwhelmingly named the Portland Writing Project, the Summer Literacy Curriculum Camp, and the Professional Development Days—which were all led by classroom teachers.

Teachers stated that these three programs were practical and related specifically to their content. The programs gave them models of new strategies and curricula, hands-on practice, and time for collaboration and implementation. Teachers also said they appreciated the

support of ongoing professional development, instead of the one-shot variety. What struck me in reading the surveys and talking with teachers was that the top-down approach of telling teachers what to do without engaging them in active learning is as ineffective in professional development as it is in the classroom.

In the same way that some teachers insult students by assuming that they have no knowledge, history, culture, or language, some schools and school districts insult teachers by assuming that they come to professional development without any prior knowledge or expertise. For example, last year a literacy “expert” came to town with her bag of tricks. She landed at a school that had a literacy team representing teachers across the disciplines. Instead of finding out what they knew, she proceeded to teach them about “think alouds,” graphic organizers, textbook previewing, and reading strategies they’d already been implementing in their classrooms.

Another common professional development pitfall is the series of overheads, which is currently being replaced by the dancing PowerPoint presentation, with too-simple bulleted points about complex issues like inclusion of special education students or English Language Learners in mainstream classrooms, as if naming a problem constituted addressing it. Without any modeling, discussion, or time to plan for implementation, the leaders of these inoculation sessions expect

Linda Christensen (lchrist@aol.com) is an editor of Rethinking Schools. She is the author of Reading, Writing, and Rising Up. She teaches English at Grant High School in Portland, Ore.

The top-down approach of telling teachers what to do without engaging them in active learning is as ineffective in professional development as it is in the classroom.

teachers to take the theory back and apply it in their classrooms. This is like taking students to the Louvre, showing them great art, and expecting them to reproduce it without giving them any lessons on drawing and painting.

Portland Writing Project

The Portland Writing Project (PWP), a collaboration between Portland Public Schools and the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College, is one of the 189 sites of the National Writing Project (NWP). The Portland Writing Project models the pedagogy it hopes teachers will take back to their classrooms, but it also encourages teachers to constantly reflect on their classroom practice and revise their teaching based on their observations. Like the NWP, the PWP doesn't preach one way to teach writing; it teaches the writing process. But in Portland, we also help teachers learn to develop their own curriculum.

Every summer for most of the past 20 years, 25 K-12 Portland Public Schools teachers have gathered to share writing strategies and lessons with each other during an intensive (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.) four-week class; they receive 10.5 university credits for participating. At our site, my co-director and I choose a multicultural novel that situates our teaching in a period of U.S. history, so that teachers can learn to integrate history, reading, novel study, writing, and students' lives into their lessons.

For a number of years we read *Nisei Daughter*, Monica Sone's autobiography, which takes place during the Japanese-American internment. The participants, co-directors, and I developed role plays and writing assignments using the book, primary source documents, children's books, or other parallel texts on the topic. While the co-directors and I provide the framework for the summer institute, each teacher develops and teaches a writing lesson that contributes to the unit. For example, Alexis Aquino-Mackles, a first-grade teacher, read a section of *Nisei Daughter* that described how Sone's family burned "everything Japanese: Japanese dolls, music, swords, Japanese poetry." Then she read a section from *Farewell to Manzanar* where a



DAVID McLIMANS

Japanese-American mother breaks her family's heirloom dishes one at a time rather than sell them to the vultures who lurked in Japanese-American neighborhoods during the evictions and bought families' valuables at ridiculously low prices prior to the internment. She gave each member of our class a broken piece of pottery and had us write an interior monologue from the character's point of view about that moment.

Tanya McCoy, a high school science teacher, asked each of us to bring a baggie full of soil from our garden. After conducting experiments on the soil and discussing how different the soil would be in the mostly desert-like settings of the internment camps, we wrote about our experiments.

Our intention is not for teachers to grab this particular unit and slavishly follow the lessons; instead we aim to

equip teachers to think in interdisciplinary terms and see themselves as curriculum developers, not consumers of other people's curriculum. The work around *Nisei Daughter* is an important example, but only because it provides a model for how teachers of any grade level or content area might approach developing units of study. I intentionally model curriculum that struggles with racism and inequality of all kinds, that encourages teachers to think about engaging students in why there is inequality and oppression, and that looks for places of solidarity, hope, and alternatives.

All the teachers in the PWP also participate in reading groups, writing response groups, role plays, and simulations. They write every assignment. They learn the strategies by *doing* the strategies, not by having someone *talk*

about “participatory, engaging, hands-on curriculum.” They know revision strategies because they use them as they write and revise their own narratives, essays, and poetry. They can teach students methods for opening narratives or strategies for knocking their classmates’ socks off with their dialogue because they learn how to write like writers during the institute. Teachers also reflect after each activity on how they will use or adapt the strategies in their classrooms. They meet in grade-level groups throughout the four weeks to plan for the following year. It is their activity, their plans, and their growth that provides the content and the goal of this kind of professional development.

The intent of the PWP is not to “fix” broken teachers; it provides a rich environment for teachers to practice literacy, to have hard conversations about thorny issues that surface in their classroom practice. This is the kind of dialogue that simply can’t happen in top-down trainings or when teachers are handed a packaged curriculum created at Princeton.

Of course, not all teachers who attend the summer institute bring stellar practice. Some are victims of bad writing instruction themselves; others have internalized the need to look outside of their classroom for answers, to find an expert or guru to follow instead of becoming their own experts. During the four weeks, the co-directors and I work with participants to tease out what they do know and what they can share. We try to validate and expand their knowledge—in the same way we respond to students in our classrooms.

PWP teachers continue to meet monthly during the year following the summer institute. (Some teachers have continued to come to these meetings for a number of years, and almost 100 teachers gather for our yearly writing retreat in February.) They discuss the implementation of strategies in their classroom. They bring in student work to examine, successful lessons to share, and problems to ponder and solve.

Because many teachers have not *experienced* a classroom that engages their hearts and minds while also teaching them to read and write critically, it is essential that professional development do more than *describe* good classroom practice. We can’t just hand teachers a program to implement. Teachers need to participate in this kind of pedagogy as a student experiences it in order to understand why this kind of instruction

is necessary. For example, Ellie Hakala, a second-year language arts teacher, said at our October PWP meeting, “I never realized how important students’ sharing their work was until I went through the Writing Project. When I wrote a great piece, I wanted everyone to hear it, not just my small group. I wanted to hear what others had written. Now my students want to share all the time as well.”

Summer Curriculum Camps

In collaboration with a group of language arts teachers representing each of our high schools, I designed the Curriculum Camp specifically to give teachers time to create curriculum and to bring a more diverse, multicultural, contemporary reading list into our high school language arts classrooms. Instead of just buying the books and putting them in bookrooms across the city, I wrote a grant to pay teachers to come together and write curriculum guides to help teach the novels. Of course, it would have been cheaper and faster to buy pre-packaged curriculum for teachers to open each fall and follow the directions. But our group wanted to hone teachers’ capacities to create curriculum from the ground up, so we chose to take the time and spend the money to share and build teacher knowledge. Because the novels, like the ones we chose for the Portland Writing Project, included sensitive cultural, racial, and gender issues as well as historic events that not all teachers were familiar with, we knew it was important to spend time researching background knowledge and talking about how to teach the novels. We wanted to expand the repertoire of instructional strategies that teachers use, but we also wanted to link those strategies to deeper, more challenging content.

Our intent was to integrate the canon, but also to share the expertise of our skilled teachers as we wove reading and writing strategies into these study guides. (Many of these teachers participated in the Portland Writing Project sometime during the past 20 years.) Many of us needed to learn how to teach reading and writing skills more effectively. Using the PWP model of teachers teaching teachers, we took turns teaching workshops that shared effective strategies while we built our units.

We received a grant from the privately funded Portland Public School Foundation for \$40,000—enough to purchase sets of books for every high

school and to pay two teachers from each school their hourly wage for 30 hours of work. Other teachers volunteered to come for credit. They were hungry for a community where they could learn and share with each other. At the end of the first summer one teacher wrote, “I have learned that we are our best resources.”

Six years later, we continue to meet for a week each summer, scrounging money from various grants or the district’s coffers. In fact, more than 90 percent of PPS high school language arts teachers, as well as a number of ESL, special education, and social studies teachers, have attended at least one summer camp.

We spend part of each morning discussing provocative readings and topics or attending reading or writing workshops that participants asked us to provide. We talk about the tough issues: How to differentiate our curriculum with an increasingly diverse student body, how to work with students who don’t speak or write Standard English, how to teach students to design their own essay topics. Then teachers move into work groups to develop curriculum on new novels, non-fiction texts, or hot topics. For example, teachers have created curriculum on *Persepolis*, *Kite Runner*, *Fences*, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, as well as *Fast Food Nation*, *Nickel and Dimed*, and *Smoke Signals*. (For a full list see High School Literature Sets at: <http://159.191.14.139/docs/pg/914>)

The curriculum camp provides another lesson for professional development: New teachers need time to grow their practice with skilled professionals. During the Summer Curriculum Camp first-year teachers and veteran teachers a year or two from retirement work side-by-side developing curriculum and learning new skills. As one first-year teacher wrote, “Being new to teaching, the greatest thing about the Literacy Project has been . . . learning tons about everything, soaking up as much as I can. Up to this point, I really had a limited collection of strategies to use.”

During the first summer of the literacy camp, I told my colleagues that I was less interested in the curriculum guides we produced than the process of teachers working together and learning from each other. Mistake. The guides are also important. They are the written legacy of our summer work. But the guides also indicate our curricular weaknesses and blind spots. Some are brilliant. Others limp along with too many

**In presenting to their colleagues, they teach their lessons,
but they also teach the underlying assumptions about good pedagogy
and content knowledge that animate their work.**

Internet downloads and not enough inspired teaching. Some miss the point.

After each summer, I review the guides to see what lessons we learned and what we missed as we create our work for the following summer.

If we purchased guides for the books or distributed anthologies with questions and writings mapped out for the teachers, we would miss these opportunities to learn together to build curriculum for the students who populate *our* schools. While published guides may be slicker in presentation than ours, they lack the creative struggle of teachers making decisions about the *best* way to introduce the book, the *best* way to teach *how* to read this particular text.

Professional Development Days

How do teachers get better at their craft? How do we create “life-long learners” in the teaching profession? If we don’t reach beyond our classrooms to learn new strategies or engage in debates with our colleagues, we can grow rigid and narrow. No matter how long we’ve been teaching or how good we are, we can always benefit from gathering with colleagues and sharing new curriculum ideas and strategies, talking about new issues that have surfaced, or discussing old issues that we still need to tackle.

As teachers, professional development needs to provide us with time-outs from our work, so we can step back and ask the questions about our daily practice that needle us. We need time to think, discuss, debate, find new strategies and resources for our classrooms and ourselves. Too often professional development is provided in tiny morsels from 3:30 to 5:30 after we have taught all day—or squeezed into an hour one morning a month. Fortunately, the Portland Association of Teachers and Portland Public Schools hammered out an agreement to provide five paid professional development days for teachers each year. Originally, the days were set aside to give teachers time to become familiar with the state standards, work samples, and scoring rubrics. Typically,

these days have been divided between school-based professional development and district professional development.

During the seven years I worked as the high school language arts curriculum specialist, I met regularly with the high school literacy leaders, a group comprised of one language arts liaison from every comprehensive and alternative high school. Together, we decided to commit our professional development days to disseminating the curriculum guides developed during the summer, sharing strategies, discussing the impact of district or state initiatives on our classrooms (like high school reform), or bringing in occasional speakers to address hot issues, like untracking.

A few years ago we started developing interdisciplinary workshops with social studies, ESL, and special education teachers. These days broke us out of our classrooms and content areas to share our practice, but also helped us disseminate the curriculum we developed each summer. During this time, we engaged as intellectuals with other teachers in meaningful discussions about our content—and the world. Instead of sitting in rows, listening to some “expert” tell us about effective classroom practice, we experience it with our colleagues.

For example, on a recent professional development day, Carmel Ross and Lisa Walker, two of the teachers who developed curriculum for *Bronx Masquerade*, shared one of the strategies from their summer work. They led participants on a treasure hunt, a pre-reading activity that develops background knowledge prior to entering a unit of study. Their interactive workshop taught about the main characters of the Harlem Renaissance and demonstrated how to get “TAG, ELL, SPED, and Johnny out of their seats and into your curriculum.”

In another workshop, Hyung Nam, a social studies teacher, led language arts, social studies, and ESL colleagues in a lesson on “Institutional Racism and Segregation in the Post-Civil Rights Era and in Portland.” His lesson centered on two central questions: How do segrega-

tion and racial disparities persist after the Civil Rights Era? How does Portland’s history with segregation and environmental racism compare to the national history? Hyung’s lessons explored the multiple causes of racial segregation and environmental racism while helping students understand how institutional racism is perpetuated today. His workshop included a mock tribunal and examination of local history with ongoing segregation and racism.

Teachers not only learned new pedagogy, they walked away with information, including handouts and historical documents on the structural features of racism to use with their students. They experienced learning by participating in the trial, not by reading about it. They engaged in conversations about racism in their city and learned how to teach about it at the same time.

Teachers who present—and over the years we have worked to enlist as many teachers as presenters as possible—learn twice as much. They not only engage as participants in the workshops throughout the day, they also gain clarity about their own practice by sharing it with other teachers. In presenting to their colleagues, they teach their lessons, but they also teach the underlying assumptions about good pedagogy and content knowledge that animate their work.

Teacher-centered professional development doesn’t happen unless district—and school—administrators and curriculum leaders have intimate knowledge of teachers’ practice. Just putting teacher X in front of the faculty will not lead to the kind of professional development I am advocating. Curriculum leaders must take the effort to listen to teachers’ conversations when they talk about their classrooms and their students, they must observe teachers at work with students and colleagues, and they must look for exemplary practice and curricular expertise. Ultimately, they must have a vision of professional development that puts classroom teachers at the center. ■

Conversations on Quality

An interview with Gloria Ladson-Billings

■ BY WAYNE AU

Gloria Ladson-Billings is considered one of the leaders in scholarship concerning the education of African-American children today. Most notably she is credited with the concept of “culturally relevant pedagogy,” which is explored in great depth in her book The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children, where she asks the African-American community in her study to identify good teachers (regardless of race) and develops profiles of those teachers. Ladson-Billings is currently the Kellner Family Chair in Urban Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and holds the office of the President of the American Educational Research Association.

RS: What is quality teaching? How do we assess whether teachers are achieving it?

Ladson-Billings: We can't settle on what we mean by teacher quality. The most reductive notions have to do with how many courses somebody has in a subject area, where they graduated from, and how much time they've spent in the field. The more expansive notions have to do with what we see happening in a classroom where teachers are actually teaching. Almost no one has time to do that. There is a pre-service component to teacher preparation that allegedly has that. Student teaching is such an artificial environment. It's controlled, and everybody knows it. The student teacher knows it. The cooperating teacher knows it. The kids in the class know it. The supervisor shows up and everything is a performance. It's been staged. That's just a fact of life of most student teaching.

We don't really get to see teacher quality until we see someone who has full responsibility for their classroom, and in which we see them on site and we get to talk with them in an environment where they are now teaching. That would give you a sense of the range of teacher quality. So, until we can do that, we're stuck with a set of performances and artifacts, and then we are deducing from those what teacher quality is. Because it's on a statewide level now, it's pretty much around licensure. Now that's not to say that I don't think we should have licensure. I think we should, but I think that licensure is a floor; it's not a ceiling.

RS: So how does this issue of definition affect who gets in the classroom?

Wayne Au (wayne.wk.au@gmail.com) is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is a Rethinking Schools editor.

Ladson-Billings: Because we've got a very minimum standard—you have to have successfully gone through a teacher education program—then the definition of teacher quality sort of falls back on the programs that have recommended teachers, and that's pretty much it. It's not so much that we've looked at that individual in relation to the skills that she or he has developed.

I don't think we pay enough attention to the context in which people do their work. Just because somebody is a good teacher for a certain community doesn't mean that they are a good teacher in every community. And most teachers don't get tested in that way. A lot of the people who end up in urban communities, however, are there by default. There isn't anywhere else to go. There are no other jobs. So they're in a place that they feel ill prepared for, where there isn't much success around them and they don't actually have the ability to build their quality.

The other problem is that we expect teacher quality to show up on day one of the teacher's job. No one would expect attorneys or physicians to be at the top of their form on their first jobs. So we don't have a progressive way of looking at teaching as a craft that one gets better at with more time, more experience, and more knowledge.

RS: Do you see the provisions for “highly qualified” teachers found in NCLB addressing this problem?

Ladson-Billings: No. I think what it does is it at least creates some minimum floor below which some things can't fall. So if you take California for example [where Ladson-Billings used to live and teach], we both know that there are places in California where you just need a pulse. They actually had some specified number of college units and didn't care what they were at one time. They may have changed that, but it used to be that to get an emergency credential you needed 98 units. That wasn't even a college degree. A college degree was like 120. Having a provision for what constitutes a highly qualified teacher at least raises that for places like that. But that doesn't mean that you've now got everybody as highly qualified if you take that literally. It doesn't mean that they are among the best available.

RS: What do you think the issues of race and culture are in relation to highly qualified teachers?

Ladson-Billings: Well, part of being highly qualified as a teacher is that you actually understand kids, you understand community, you understand context—so that you go into a setting and you're able to understand enough about the set-



JOSEPH BLOUGH

Society has never made a commitment to school funding equity. It seems to me that's a minimum responsibility the society must meet. The second issue is that of truly desegregating schools. Those two elements have never truly been tried and until we see those two things through I think we just continue to rearrange the deck chairs on a sinking ship.

ting, enough about yourself, to be able to be effective.

The person that comes down from New Trier [a wealthy district] schools in Illinois and says, "Oh, I really want to teach in Chicago because I really want to make a contribution," but thinks that the way they taught in New Trier is the way to do it on the south side of Chicago hasn't accurately read the situation, hasn't made good use of their own decision-making and problem-solving skills. Now I'm not saying that the kids on the south side of Chicago aren't entitled to an enriched curriculum. You know if you really think Shakespeare is important, then it's important. I don't think that you should not teach Shakespeare because the kids are in Chicago, but the way in which you might teach it might need some radical changes.

Issues of race are tied to more macro-social problems that the society has not and apparently will not address. For example, the society has *never* made a commitment to school funding equity. It seems to me that's a minimum responsibility the society must meet. The second issue is that of truly desegregating schools. Those two elements have never truly been tried and until we see those two things through I think we just continue to rearrange the deck chairs on a sinking ship.

RS: So how would you define a quality teacher?

Ladson-Billings: I don't think you can think of a quality teacher absent student learning. I'm being careful of what I'm saying here. I'm not saying "achievement" just simply because people read achievement as test scores. That's not what I'm talking about. If the kids aren't really learning anything, how can you be highly qualified? That has got to be an ultimate goal of the enterprise—that students come out able to solve problems, able to make decisions, able to critically analyze their environments. If that's not happening I really don't care what your certificate says.

If students come away from a class not really having learned to do some basic things like think and problem solve and make decisions, then I don't see how you can call it highly qualified. I know people don't want to say that the teacher is responsible for this, that, and the other, but how do we justify our place in the society if indeed it is not our responsibility to help kids learn? I don't even think there is anything you can say on paper about that teacher that can be the sole determiner of highly qualified teaching. Highly qualified teaching is intimately tied to results, but I'm not talking about results as standardized tests. ■

'Summer Camp' for Teachers

An innovative professional development project expands the literature canon and creates multicultural curriculum in Portland, Oregon.

By S. J. Childs

The voices coming from the Madison High School cafeteria are loud and excited. It is the end of June, but these voices aren't students talking about vacation. They belong to 50 high school teachers from Portland Public Schools who gave up some of their break to attend the Summer Literacy Institute, known unofficially as "Summer Camp."

The Institute is one week of intensive collaboration among teachers to develop curriculum units and workshops around multicultural texts. The summer of 2001 was the Institute's third year.

Why would teachers give up their first week of vacation to start working all over again? As one teacher put it, "The end of the school year can be depressing. After this week, that depression is gone. I have great books and great lessons I can take into next year."

The Summer Literacy Institute differs sharply from many staff development models, which take a top-down approach and rely on non-district "experts." Instead, the Institute is led by Portland teachers, with the goal of developing a collaborative, ongoing staff development process that relies on local teacher-experts to lead future workshops and in-services. Over 75 teachers — more than half of all Portland Public Schools' high school language arts teachers — have gone through the Summer Literacy Institute or have led workshops during the year.

DISTRICTWIDE REFORM

The Institute's ultimate curriculum goal is to expand the language arts "canon" to include more culturally diverse readings that raise social justice issues, and to create curriculum that engages students in linking the literature to their lives and the broader society.

Such a specific and directed reform isn't successful if it is happening in only a few classrooms or in a couple of buildings. While in many areas of education decentralization and site control are positive changes, in the context of curriculum development

and teacher education, a central vision and a districtwide reform effort can have several advantages. Portland is a good example.

Linda Christensen — Portland Public Schools Language Arts Curriculum Specialist and *Rethinking Schools* editor — designed the Institute as an alternative model for teacher education. Christensen assembled a team of teacher advisors (one from every high school) who met monthly to assist in the development, planning, and revision of the Summer Literacy Institute and the other staff development workshops that take place throughout the year.

Too often, teachers are subjected to staff development that relies on outside experts lecturing at us from a distance, ignoring our own expertise and professional knowledge. Stuck in rows of chairs, we passively listen while highly paid outsiders impose their "wisdom" and authority. In the Institute, classroom teachers are the experts. The Institute promotes collaboration and fosters a sense of community; it is also a model for new-teacher training, pairing new teachers with veterans to help guide them in developing curriculum.

During this Institute, teachers engage in three main activities. First, they read research articles on literacy, language, and achievement.

Second, mornings are devoted to teachers sharing lessons — perhaps on using watercolor painting to access a novel's meaning, or improvisation to understand a character's motives and actions. In an effort to move toward reflection and critical analysis, we also devote morning time to issues such as creating independent reading opportunities, integrating English language learners into the classroom, and bridging the achievement gap. (This format was modified slightly after the first two years.)

Third, in the afternoon, teams of teachers meet together to develop lessons and strategies around a book or theme that are available for other teachers to use throughout the year. These lessons and strategies have become the basis for later staff development workshops.

OPENING THE CANON

The goal is to infuse district classrooms with books and lessons that address issues of race, culture, class, and gender. In various forums throughout the school year, Christensen invites teachers to lead workshops on strategies to improve reading and writing, but she makes special effort to seek out teachers who will offer workshops that raise questions about social justice and that focus on multicultural literature.

Of course, even the best workshops don't necessarily transform classroom practice. Not all teachers are willing to open their locked boxes of canonical curriculum to admit a few titles not on the dead-white-men list. But every year, more of those teachers retire or leave; and every year new teachers enter the district and try to figure out what they are "supposed" to teach.

The Summer Literacy Institute pairs these new teachers with master teachers. And the Institute introduces more titles that deal with issues of social justice and that speak more directly to our students' lives. Because of the Institute, diverse titles are being bought and getting used. Just glancing at the list of some of the recently purchased books by the school district as a result of the Summer Literacy Institute (see page 5) shows us something has changed.

During the first year of the Literacy Institute, the teacher-advisors set guidelines for the literature we would write curriculum around. We wanted to introduce literature that puts traditionally marginalized groups at the center. We adapted guidelines from the San Francisco Unified School District and "Teachers' Choice for 1996: A Project of the International Reading Association." We sought to select titles that: 1) reflect high literary quality; 2) have cross-cultural themes; 3) actively challenge stereotypes; 4) raise issues of class, race, gender, and justice; 5) move beyond victimization and show resistance and empowerment; 6) provide historical context and deepen cultural knowledge; and 7) have the potential for use across the curriculum.

Teachers have developed units around

works such as *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya; *Slam* by Walter Dean Myers; and *Thousand Pieces of Gold* by Ruthanne Lum McCunn. Over 30 curriculum guides have been developed over the last three years. (See box for a sampling of these.)

For *Thousand Pieces of Gold* social studies and language arts teachers integrated the study of the novel with its historical, political, and social contexts. The curriculum includes a lesson on Confucian philosophy and invites students to look at their own family structures for similarities. Another lesson asks students to examine the social construction of beauty and how it oppresses women. Using the foot-binding in the story as a jumping off place, students brainstorm ways our society today compels people to alter their bodies to fit in, and then write personal narratives on the subject. Another lesson requires students to read newspaper articles on current immigration situations and draft fictional pieces about the subjects of the articles, allowing them to link immigration issues of the past with those of today.

Some of us created units to reintroduce African-American classics such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston or *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Lessons for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* focus on the politics of language; examine the relationship between art and justice; use the lenses of race, class, and gender to analyze scenes from the novel; and help students write their own “love” stories.

Some teachers in the Institute pair the “classics” with modern pieces to open new doors into the issues. For instance, during the 2000 Literacy Project, language arts and social studies teachers used *Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver with *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad in a unit on colonialism that includes simulations, role plays, poetry writing, character logs, and more.

Others have chosen new pieces of literature that give voice to those not often featured in the language arts curriculum — for example, prisoners, Native Americans, Latinos, poor people — with books like *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake; *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago; and *Where the Heart Is* by Billie Letts. All three of these units invite students to make connec-

tions between their own lives and the main characters. (Admittedly, while *Where the Heart Is* focuses on a poor teen mom and strikes a chord with many of our students, it is hardly a “social justice” novel. Characters do not engage in acts of resistance to effect greater equality and the narrative never questions the legitimacy of a society where the Wal-Mart CEO, one of the richest men in the world, looks generous by giving the main character a few hundred dollars and a job. However, the curriculum developed during the Institute explores essential issues only hinted at by the book — inviting students to participate in a class analysis of work and to study Wal-Mart's dependence on sweatshop labor and the displacement of local businesses through its marketplace bullying.)

A few groups organized their units around a theme. For example, *Language, Manipulation and Globalization* is a multidisciplinary unit using film, fiction, and non-fiction to analyze the role of the media and consumerism on cultures and the environment. Texts include *Savages* by Joe Kane; *My Year of Meats* by Ruth Ozeki; *Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen; and *The Legacy of Luna* by Julia Butterfly Hill, as well as films like *Killing Us Softly* and *Wag the Dog*.

A team of teachers I worked with created a Women's Literature Unit, subtitled Women and Resistance, focusing on the power and resistance of women in society and not on their victimization. We use early classic authors like Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, but also explore newer works like Julia Alvarez' *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*. In a series of lessons, students examine the use of silence as a tool of oppression and the power of silence as a form of resistance. From this they write their own narratives about times they were silenced or used

silence as a source of power.

Christensen, the Institute organizer, secured foundation grants so that the district could purchase class sets of books featured in curriculum units. Many schools, including my own, matched these purchases by buying additional class sets of curriculum-featured books. We have also developed a “centralized” collection at the District library and have begun a new era of sharing collections among schools.

But putting books into bookrooms is not enough. Without the curriculum guides developed by the Institute participants, many of the new titles and a lot of the old ones would be used by only a couple of teachers and would gather dust the rest of the year. When the structure of school life keeps us isolated during most of the year it is difficult to borrow, steal, and share; but these guides encourage that kind of sharing and make it easier for teachers — novice and veteran — to try new things and to move beyond the comfortable.

UNCOVERING WEAKNESSES

To be sure, there are still plenty of teachers ignoring these more multicultural titles, still giving fact-chasing multiple choice tests, never offering students a chance to hear and speak in their own voices, nor inviting them to critique the world around them. But more and more they find themselves at the margins.

In addition to being ignored by some teachers, this teachers-teaching-teachers model of curriculum development has other weaknesses. For example, new teachers may have great ideas, but they often lack the critical awareness that comes with years of reflective teaching. The curriculum guides make it less scary to try new titles, but many also reflect the short timetable, limited knowledge base, and uneven teaching skills of some participants.

Some teachers pair ‘the classics’ with modern novels, such as *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Heart of Darkness*. Others focus on new pieces of literature.

Teachers are exposed to new literature through the curriculum guides; but unfortunately, they are exposed to some poorly designed lessons as well. In the Institute's first two years, we had clear standards for the texts we chose, but neglected to impose standards on the lessons we included. In order not to destroy the spirit of collaboration and good will, many teacher-teams avoided the harder questions about each other's lessons and strategies. Some units became dumping grounds, where any remotely connected lesson was included: not examined, not tried out, not revised. Some lessons were fun and engaging, but didn't delve into the texts' historical or political realities.

Just as our own teaching evolves with time and critical reflection, so too the Summer Literacy Institute has evolved. Any district hoping to adapt this model must see it as a continual work in progress.

Recognizing these weaknesses, this year, Christensen and her teacher advisors redesigned the Institute to create an atmosphere of critique and revision. Wanting participants to use their time more reflectively, organizers developed a new format, switching from morning show-and-tell workshops to morning discussions. In heterogeneous discussion groups, teachers — from different curriculum teams, from different schools, with different years of experience — confronted a series of vexing issues.

For example, we talked about the question of home language in the classroom: When should teachers demand that students use Standard English and when is home language acceptable, or even encouraged? What are ways to “correct” that respect students' cultures? Alternatively, how do teachers often correct in disrespectful ways? What do we need to know about the relationship between culture and language to answer these questions? Discussions of these and other issues helped push teachers to consider what for many were topics they had not thought deeply about. The curriculum guides were likely better because of this effort.

In addition to morning conversations, teams were encouraged to reflect before developing lessons, and to critique after writing lessons. Groups used critical questions, developed previously by participants,

to guide the early discussions. They examined whether the lessons addressed the different needs and abilities of the students. They identified how the lessons developed reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills. They asked how the lessons connected the material to the students' lives, how they connected the unit to society, and how they addressed race, gender, and class issues. Repeatedly, Christensen encouraged us to clarify our goals, revisit old lessons, critique each other's work, and eliminate the weak stuff.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

One important feature of the Summer Literacy Institute is the cross training that develops within and after the summer. Now, during the school district in-service days, a cadre of teachers from within the district is available to lead workshops. Because classroom teachers lead these workshops, they speak more directly to teachers' needs. Those attending are less resentful, as teachers can be when a non-teaching or university-based “expert” is brought in to tell them how to teach.

While those teaching the workshops get paid their hourly rate, the expense is far less than flying in experts, and the money saved can be used to do more teacher education, buy more books, and create more curriculum. It also gives teachers a chance to peek into each other's classrooms without having to leave their own, and has developed a certain pride throughout the District.

The ethic of collaboration that has emerged from the Institute and the workshops has been remarkable. Indeed, when reading Institute evaluations and talking with participants, it is hard to extract a comment that is not filled with giddy enthusiasm. One teacher noted: “I had the chance to collaborate with a most gifted instructor to develop a unit I can't wait to teach. What the Literacy Institute makes evident is that working teachers, sharing their best practices provide the best forum for developing new curriculum. After a long hard year, meeting with my fellow language arts instructors from across the district re-energized me.”

In my 11th year as a Portland teacher, I have noticed that the community of language arts teachers has grown beyond “that

nice teacher down the hall who lent me a lesson.” It is now a districtwide community.

When I first started teaching, I often felt like I was all on my own. It took long hours into the night for the first few years to gather all my tricks together. Even with the Portland Writing Project under my belt, I needed more to grow. I needed to work with others on a continual basis — to revisit my practice and revise my lessons.

The Summer Literacy Institute and the Workshop days throughout the year give me that chance. ■

S. J. Childs (sjchilds@pps.k12.or.us) teaches at Franklin High School in Portland, OR.

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Transforming Teaching

Milwaukee's teacher-run councils helped enrich districtwide reform. Their demise leaves a vacuum for progressive teachers searching to promote classroom-based innovation.

BY BOB PETERSON

Nearly a decade ago, African-American educator Asa Hilliard spoke to a gathering of elementary teachers and principals in Milwaukee, stressing the central role of teacher knowledge and attitudes in any reform effort. "Curriculum is what's inside teachers' heads," he reminded us.

The significance of Hilliard's remarks went beyond the group, which consisted of the entire staffs from seven Milwaukee schools. "That inservice was the start of something big," recalls Steve Baruch, coordinator for the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Leadership Academy and an organizer of the January 1989 event. "Most people don't know it, but it was from there that many of the teacher councils, particularly the Multicultural Council, got their start."

For most of the 1990s, a network of teacher-led, districtwide councils had a significant impact on reform in MPS. In particular, the councils provided a way for progressive teachers to promote student-centered, anti-racist curricular reform.

The councils are now largely gone. They fell victim to, among other things, budget cuts, changing priorities within MPS, and a national reform effort driven by standardized test scores and "get tough" policies. But the lessons learned from the councils can shape discussion on how to promote grass-roots, districtwide reform that focuses on changing classroom practice and promotes a curriculum appropriate for our increasingly diverse and multicultural society.

Kathy Swope, former co-chair of the Multicultural Council and currently overseeing the district's performance assessment, argues that the councils' strength was that they "gave an official forum for classroom teachers to comment on various issues and to influence district policy. The councils viewed teachers as the experts. We had teachers teaching teachers, giving workshops, organizing conferences and inservices, and developing materials. The feedback was almost always that our workshops were more useful than many which were not led by teachers."

The original councils included the Multicultural Curriculum Council, Whole Language Council, Early Childhood Council, Ungraded/Multi-age Council, and the Humanities Council. Eventually a Bilingual Council, Library Council, Reading Council, and Health Council formed. In 1994, a Council of Councils was organized to coordinate the councils and to improve their ability to learn from one another.

The councils' approach contrasted sharply with the top-down approaches that characterize many school reform initiatives. The Milwaukee councils were effective because they were:

- Integrated into a districtwide curriculum reform effort with explicitly anti-racist goals;
- Led by classroom teachers;
- Organized throughout the district and across school lines;
- Focused on classroom teachers sharing their best practices.

In addition, the councils went beyond one-time inservices, and institutionalized teacher collaboration, mobilization, and training. They also recommended and provided money for classroom resources.

COUNCIL ORIGINS

Each of the councils had separate beginnings but all were tied to teacher-led initiatives and progressive curricular philosophies.

"The Multicultural Curriculum Council grew out of the Asa Hilliard inservice," Baruch recalls. "Representatives from the seven schools got together first as a study group of the Portland, OR, *African-American Baseline Essays*, and then the whole thing blossomed. About a dozen schools that had demonstrated a commitment to multicultural education were invited to send representatives and the Multicultural Council was formed."

Eventually, the Multicultural Curriculum Council included members from almost every school in the district.

The Whole Language Council had its

origins in the district's process in 1987 for adopting an elementary reading textbook. Three members of the textbook committee issued a minority report critical of traditional basal reader teaching methods. That ultimately led to an "opt-out" provision, whereby individual schools were permitted to submit a whole language reading instructional plan to replace the traditional basal reader collections of short stories and work sheets. Instead of receiving the new basal readers, the "opt-out" schools received money to buy children's literature, big books, and other materials. Thirteen schools opted for this provision. Teachers from those schools met, held joint inservices, and formed the Whole Language Council in fall 1988.

The councils received financial support from the general MPS budget up through 1996, when funding was cut off. They received on average about \$25,000 a year, although a few received about \$100,000 during their initial years. The larger budgets were either for districtwide inservices, such as those of the Early Childhood Council, or for programs to provide grants to schools. These grants, ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000, were to buy materials, pay for specific staff workshops, or hire community people for school-based projects

DISTRICTWIDE REFORM

The councils developed in the context of an even broader curricular reform effort within MPS — the K-12 Teaching and Learning Initiative. This reform, in turn, emerged at a time when the national education climate was more focused on curriculum innovation and on embracing our country's multicultural heritage and future.

The Milwaukee K-12 Reform, as it came to be called, was started in 1989 under then-Superintendent Robert Peterkin. It involved thousands of teachers and hundreds of parents and community people who worked over many months to develop the initiative's 10 teaching and learning goals (see box, page 12). K-12 played a significant role in shap-

The councils developed in the context of a district initiative known as the K-12 Reform that focused on innovation and multiculturalism.

ing nearly all reform initiatives at the time; though rarely mentioned anymore, it remains official district policy.

The reform's spirit is best captured in its self-description: "The K-12 Teaching and Learning Initiative is a mobilization to improve teaching and learning in the Milwaukee Public Schools ... It aims to offer all children an equitable, multicultural education; and teach all children to think deeply, critically and creatively."

Four teacher councils — the Multicultural Curriculum, Whole Language, Early Childhood, and Humanities Councils — played especially important roles in the K-12 reform and helped ensure its emphasis on equity and multicultural education.

"The councils are what gave flesh to the [K-12] policy," explained Swope. "In order for policies to actually effect classroom practice, you need teachers to develop strategies, try out resources, collaborate, and share their successes. This was done and led by teachers. That's why the councils were so powerful."

Cynthia Ellwood, the central office administrator who led the K-12 reform effort, explained, "The councils were about mobilization and identifying people who were particularly competent and insightful teachers. They simultaneously modeled good teaching pedagogy and gave very specific teaching ideas, along with the necessary books and materials. In fact, the councils help set the [reform] agenda for the district."

TEACHER LED

Both K-12 and the teacher councils were based on the belief that improving classroom practice is the key to districtwide reform. The structures of most schools, however, reinforce teacher isolation. Teachers have little time to collaborate with their colleagues across the hall — to say nothing of getting together with teachers from across the city. Few school reform projects have successfully wrestled with this dilemma. Instead, they rely on experts who no longer teach in the classroom, or on "teacher-proof" curriculum

with pre-determined lesson plans that leave little room for addressing the specific needs of one's students.

The Milwaukee teacher councils took a different approach. Teachers were seen as leaders and chaired all the councils. To make this possible, central administrative funds were allocated to pay for substitutes so classroom teachers could be released during the day to work on council business. The decision to pay for substitutes was key to the councils' success. Without paid substitutes at the elementary level reading resource teachers and program implementors — who don't have classrooms and thus can leave the building more easily — tend to take the lead on districtwide committees.

At the high school level, it is usually department chairs who influence district policy. The Humanities Council, however, "gave more people a chance to have input into district policy," notes Andrea Loss, a former member of the council and currently an English teacher at Metro High School. The Humanities Council provided "a great opportunity for social studies and English teachers to make curriculum connections."

Funds were also available to pay teachers for after-school council work. One lesson, however, was that all-day planning sessions were more effective. "It's hard at the end of the day to be creative," notes Mary Ellen McCarty, former chair of the Early Childhood Council.

CROSSING SCHOOL LINES

The councils promoted ongoing discussion among teachers at different schools. They brought together some of the most committed teachers and gave them time and resources to help educate and mobilize other teachers. Through workshops, conferences, inservice courses, newsletters, and resource vendor fairs, the councils' impact was felt throughout the district.

The most extensive example is the work of the Early Childhood Council, which was founded in 1991. The council coordinated a

series of workshops to help teachers improve their teaching and implement the K-12 reform. In 1992-93, for example, every single kindergarten teacher in the district was released for three days to attend workshops led by classroom teachers with outstanding practice. The following year, all first grade teachers attended similar inservices, with a new grade level inserviced each year for two more years.

"The workshops touched every early childhood [K-third grade] teacher," explained Mary Randall, a kindergarten teacher, now retired, who was former chair of the Early Childhood Council. "We had teachers — new ones and experienced ones — learning about the very best techniques from people who were excellent classroom teachers."

BEST PRACTICES

The councils didn't rely only on inservices to promote quality teaching. The Whole Language Council funded entire staffs from participating schools to attend workshops of the National Writing Project. The Multicultural Council held quarterly after-school meetings and an annual weekend conference which highlighted exemplary teacher practice. Most councils put out newsletters highlighting resources and inservice opportunities.

The Humanities and the Multicultural Councils both made menus of quality multicultural literature and teaching guides. The councils provided schools with the funds to buy materials from the menu and then held workshops on how to effectively use the materials in the classroom.

Some of the councils also put out specific teacher guides. The Multicultural Council, for example, published a "Guide for Implementation of Goal 1 of the MPS K-12 Teaching and Learning Initiative." Despite its lackluster title, the guide provided both a theoretical explanation and specific lesson plans and resources for teachers to deal with the difficult issue of anti-racist education. The Early Childhood Council piloted early childhood screening methods and prepared

a video tape to help teachers. It also put out a kindergarten guide to hands-on learning and developmentally appropriate instruction. The Reading Council developed districtwide reading curricula.

While emphasizing lessons from classroom teachers, the councils also brought to Milwaukee a number of well-respected experts, such as James Banks, Howard Zinn, Enid Lee, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Bill Bigelow, Asa Hilliard, Nancy Schniedewind, and Carlos Cortez.

THE DEMISE

Most of the councils ceased functioning during the 1996-1997 school year. A number of factors contributed to their decline, including district budget cuts, the push for decentralization, a refocusing of the curriculum reform effort on school-to-work, and weaknesses within the councils themselves. (Not all the councils have completely dissolved. Former members of the Multicultural Council, for instance, have reconstituted themselves as the Multicultural Curriculum Education Advisory Board and they continue to hold workshops. Likewise, former members of the Early Childhood Council still meet regularly, put out a newsletter, and host an annual kindergarten conference. While these activities are testimonies to the tenacity and commitment of certain teachers, they in no way fill the void created by the overall demise of the councils.)

State-mandated revenue caps increasingly squeezed the MPS budget throughout the mid-1990s. In response, the school board slashed programs such as summer school and staff development. At the same time, under the leadership of then-Superintendent Howard Fuller, the school board started to radically decentralize many services. One result was increasing pressures to cut funds in the Curriculum and Instruction division at Central Office that had funded the councils. Without money for substitutes and basic operating expenses, most council activities slowed down. Moreover, without adequate funds for districtwide inservices, some councils increasingly found themselves preaching to the converted. These factors sapped the vitality of several councils and hastened their dissolution.

One lesson is painfully clear. Radical

decentralization can undermine progressive reforms that are centrally coordinated. With the defunding of the councils and of inservices paid for by central office, a coordinated emphasis on developing and promoting anti-racist curriculum has all but evaporated within MPS.

The councils were also affected by the district's emphasis on school-to-work reforms during the mid-1990s. While district administrators presented school-to-work as an extension and deepening of the K-12 reform, in practice the initiative refocused many peoples' energies. Some elementary schools, for example, set up banks and stores instead of organizing multicultural activities. Other indications of the district's emphasis on school to work: all schools had to identify school-to-work coordinators, and inservice funds were concentrated on school-to-work.

The councils also had their shortcomings. They would have been in a much stronger position to prevent their defunding if they had done a few things differently. For instance:

- The councils could have done a better job reaching out to a wider network of teachers, particularly connecting council representatives to classroom teachers who were not council members. This problem became exacerbated as budgets were cut, and some councils became too ingrown.

- Some councils could have increased their advocacy role. For example, the Multicultural Council "could have taken a stronger stand in favor of the African-American immersion schools," according to Baruch. At the same time, the Early Childhood Council successfully advocated for an expansion of K-4 kindergarten and improved assessment tools in the SAGE project to reduce class size.

- The councils could have fought harder to institutionalize their status, perhaps through the teacher union contract. One problem is that, until the end, the councils were dependent on the administration's and school board's spending whims.

Had the councils been promoted by a visionary superintendent or school board, conditions in the district might be different today. The mobilization of progressive teachers, so necessary for districtwide school reform, might have continued and expanded.

Relative to the overall budget of MPS,

the money spent on the teacher councils was minuscule. The results, however, were immense. The councils inspired hundreds, at times thousands, of teachers. As McCarty of the Early Childhood Council said, the councils were "the only spark in teachers' lives to learn new techniques and reaffirm the positive things they were doing."

While there is no scientific way to measure the councils' effectiveness, one could argue from the vantage point of Asa Hilliard—that the councils had started to change "what's in teachers' heads." It is an unfinished task. ■

Bob Peterson (repmilw@aol.com) teaches fifth grade in Milwaukee and is an editor of Rethinking Schools.

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Teachers Evaluating Teachers

By Barbara Miner

Diana Porter, who has been teaching in the Cincinnati public schools for 20 years, has been evaluated by the administration three times: after her first and third years, and once when she switched schools. Like many teachers, she felt that the traditional evaluation process was often a joke. Some principals gave outstanding evaluations to teachers who dozed in class because the teacher was a friend. Some principals based their evaluation on whether the students had clean desks. Some principals made evaluations after only 20 minutes of observing the class.

In Porter's case, she once got an excellent evaluation because she was a German teacher and the principal, who didn't speak German, was impressed by the fact that no English was spoken in class. But he didn't have a clue what was really going on, Porter said.

"Abuses went on like that over the years," Porter told *Rethinking Schools*. "It was totally a joke."

Porter was enthusiastic, therefore, when the teachers' union initiated the Peer Assistance and Appraisal Program in 1985-86. Under the program, experienced teachers, known as consulting teachers, leave the classroom for two years and "mentor" new teachers and evaluate whether their contracts should be renewed. Second, and more controversial, consulting teachers also work with veteran teachers with serious teaching problems, a process known as "intervention." If the troubled teacher has not sufficiently improved her/his skills after two years, the consulting teacher has the authority to recommend the teacher be fired.

Increasing Support

A number of teachers and administrators were initially leery of the program, according to Tom Mooney, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers. But views, by and large, have changed. The administration, for example, has seen that peer evaluators not only provide needed support for teachers, but are stricter in evaluating their colleagues.

"The evidence is clear after six years that peer evaluation is more rigorous," Mooney said. "That didn't surprise us, but it surprised some administrators who thought we might be using the program to cover up or protect teachers."

In the program's first year, consulting teachers rated 10.5% of interns less than satisfactory, compared to 4% of new teachers evaluated by administrators, according to the union. Five percent of beginning teachers under peer review were dismissed, compared to 1.6% of those evaluated by principals. Results have been comparable in following years.

Peer appraisal has also been more rigorous with veteran teachers. From 1986-90, there were 43 teachers recommended for intervention. Of those, 16 were either fired or left teaching at some point during the process. Fifteen had their teaching brought up to acceptable standards, and the other cases were either continued into 1991 or were put on hold.

The peer program does not eliminate evaluations by principals and administrators. Approximately 70% of new teachers, however, are evaluated and "mentored" under the peer program. The

district hires roughly 300 new teachers a year, in a system with 3,500 certified teachers.

There are 14 consulting teachers, each working with a maximum of 14 teachers. Veteran teachers on "intervention" count as 1.5 because of the extra time needed. While consulting teachers appraise most new and troubled teachers, administrators still evaluate teachers during their third year, those seeking tenure, and those who change subject areas.

Mooney said the union initiated the peer program in part to answer the criticism that the union wasn't concerned with incompetent teachers or guaranteeing professional standards. After negotiations, the program became part of the contract between the teachers and administration.

The consulting teachers are selected jointly by the union and the Cincinnati Public Schools administration. They make their reports and recommendations to a Peer Review Panel, which consists of five teachers appointed by the union and five administrators appointed by the superintendent. The panel makes the ultimate recommendation to the superintendent whether new teachers should be renewed and whether a troubled teacher should be dismissed.

The consulting teachers leave the classroom for two years, then return after that time. George Varland, director of employee relations for the Cincinnati Public Schools and co-head of the Peer Review Panel, said a two-year maximum was imposed because "some people feel that if you're out of the classroom too long, you're going to forget what it was like."

The specialties of the consulting teachers can change from year to year. This school year, for example, there are consulting teachers in almost all elementary schools, in special education, and in secondary math, science, social studies, and English. There are none specializing in voc-ed, home-economics, or counselling, partly for financial reasons and partly because few teachers have been hired in those areas in recent years.

The Importance of Assistance

Sheila Saylor, a consulting teacher in English, said one of the strengths of the program is that it not only evaluates teachers, but provides assistance. This is especially important because new teachers have traditionally have been forced to take a sink or swim approach.

Saylor is working with 13 teachers: eight beginning teachers, three who have just transferred into the Cincinnati system, and two veteran teachers who are on intervention. The focus is on training and assistance.

"I go into their classroom and I observe them, and I talk with them about the observation," she said. "I do demonstration teaching, I help them plan, we go through the curriculum, I send them to workshops."

With new teachers, the goal is to provide sufficient support and evaluation. In the long run, this will avoid the problem of accusations of incompetence suddenly surfacing against long-time veterans who were never seriously evaluated, Saylor said.

A veteran teacher can be recommended for intervention by ei-

ther a building administrator or the union's building representative. Fellow teachers remain reluctant to recommend a colleague for intervention, and it is believed that all intervention requests have come from the administration, according to Denise Hewitt of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers.

A consulting teacher makes an initial investigation and advises the Peer Review Panel if the teacher needs intervention. If it is decided that intervention is required, a consulting teacher works with the veteran for up to two years.

"Often, the teacher has just become negligent," Saylor said. "The potential is there for success in the classroom; they've just somewhere forgotten that."

When teachers on intervention don't improve, they can be recommended for dismissal. Some teachers in intervention choose to leave teaching before the process is completed.

Many teachers were skeptical of the program at first, Saylor said. Some teachers felt threatened, some wondered whether consulting teachers were supervisors in disguise, and others questioned what right consulting teachers had to tell other teachers what to do. But teachers are increasingly supportive, in particular because they would rather be evaluated by someone who takes the time, knows the subject matter being taught, and understands the reality of classroom teaching.

Some of the strongest resistance initially came from administrators and principals, who felt their authority was being restricted.

"When the proposal was first put in, I was almost attacked by our administrators — the principals and supervisors — because I was taking away their power," recalled Varland, director of employee relations for the Cincinnati schools. "It was really quite nasty for awhile. Now, most administrators say this is a great program. It takes a lot of duties away from them and they are able to do things they weren't able to do before."

Criticism From Other Unions

Nationally, the strongest criticism has tended to come from other unions.

Peer evaluation programs have been adopted in only a handful of school districts across the country. Cincinnati's is one of the most controversial because consulting teachers can recommend dismissal of veteran teachers. In Toledo, for example, there is a similar program but consulting teachers (called lead teachers) do not make a recommendation whether teachers on intervention should be dismissed. That decision is left up to a review panel of six teacher representatives and six administrative representatives.

"This protects the relationships between the lead teacher and the teacher in intervention," said Tom Gillett, first vice president of the Rochester Teachers Association.

"We're trying to help people and improve instruction, rather than be one more big brother or one more big sister that says, 'Yup, you're no good,'" Gillett later noted.

The main critique of the Cincinnati program is that it blurs the distinction between management and teacher responsibilities, and can divide teachers against each other. By involving teachers in evaluations that could lead to dismissal, particularly of veteran teachers, the program forces teachers to undertake a management responsibility, according to this critique.

In fact, some people felt so strongly about the blurring of this

Taking a gamble, the Cincinnati teachers union tackled the issue of 'incompetent' teachers and proposed an innovative program under which teachers evaluate teachers.

distinction that legislation was introduced several years ago that would have prohibited the Cincinnati program, according to Hewitt of the CFT. The legislation, which was supported by the Ohio Education Association, didn't pass.

Hewitt admitted that the union is walking a thin line, and not only on the issue of union versus management responsibilities. In addition, the union represents both the teacher on intervention and the consulting teacher, and part of the union's job is to ensure that any teacher recommended for dismissal is guaranteed the right of due process as outlined in the contract. There are also issues of trust and tensions that crop up when a colleague evaluates a veteran teacher.

The union decided it was better to take the risk and grapple with the issue of teaching standards and accountability, however, than continue a situation where no one really addressed the problem, Hewitt said.

Shari Francis, a senior policy analyst with the National Education Association in Washington, D.C., did not want to comment specifically on the Cincinnati program. But she said the NEA generally disagrees with programs that do not distinguish between evaluations designed to improve teaching, in which peer assistance is invaluable, and evaluations which are part of a hiring or firing process and which are management's responsibility. Merging the two evaluations "can damage the integrity and openness of a true peer assistance program," Francis said. "And it calls into question appropriate roles and responsibilities within the bargaining unit."

Culture of Teaching

Porter, a former consulting teacher in Cincinnati who is now back in the classroom, said she understood that some union supporters in other districts disagreed with the Cincinnati program. She countered that school reform will never succeed unless the culture of teaching and learning changes. Teachers must be encouraged to work together, to be open to new ideas, to continue their learning, and, when necessary, to criticize each other in a constructive, professional way. In that regard, according to Porter, peer evaluation is only one part of the larger issue of ensuring professional teaching standards and improving the learning and teaching environment.

"It's not just peer evaluation," Porter said. "It's building a culture of collaboration and criticism. We have to support each other and we have to be free to criticize each other, whether it's on racism or classroom management. That's what this is all about... It has to be part of a whole reform package, to help teachers become more empowered and to change the culture in the schools." ■

Milwaukee: A Case Study

A look at this Midwestern urban district shows both the promises and challenges of sustaining a movement for multicultural, anti-racist education.

By Curtis Lawrence

Late last spring, about a dozen Milwaukee teenagers sat with a reporter to discuss multiculturalism and anti-racist education. The students were from Riverside University High School, often touted as the district's most multiracial and academically successful. But when they were asked to assess multicultural and anti-racist education, their responses may have stunned some familiar with the district.

Despite several dedicated teachers, the students said multicultural or anti-racist education wasn't happening at Riverside.

"We don't get anything but a European aspect," said Benjamin Engel, a native of Ghana, who last year was the president of Riverside's Student Council.

Hannah Nolan-Spohn, a white student who last year was a sophomore at Riverside, also noted that contemporary issues — especially those about race — don't get a lot of air-time. "In most classes, there are not serious discussions about current events," Nolan-Spohn said. "The teacher is more concerned about the lesson plan."

This is not what parents, administrators, teachers, and community activists had in mind 10 years ago when they ignited a movement to infuse a multicultural and anti-racist philosophy throughout the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). In a unique step by a major urban school district, MPS established districtwide learning goals, the first of which stated that students would "project anti-racist, anti-biased attitudes" and participate in a multicultural curriculum.

The initiative was intended to go beyond what some teachers call a "food-facts curriculum," a shallow overview of cultures and diet that sometimes passes for multicultural education. Instead, they wanted the Milwaukee students to view their world with a critical multicultural eye — whether through challenging a book where Native Americans are stereotyped or analyzing how African Americans and Latinos are portrayed on the nightly news. The district provided funding, staffing, and a strong professional development component to implement its ambitious goals.

But due to a variety of factors — a changing political climate, shifts in district leadership and vision, budget cuts, a move toward decentralization, and an increased emphasis on standards and testing — Milwaukee's multicultural movement has devolved into what can be described as "pockets of multiculturalism." The once popular initiative is now kept alive primarily by a small group of teachers and administrators.

Milwaukee's decade of experimentation with multiculturalism provides a case study of both the promises and challenges of providing a multicultural curriculum in urban school districts.

Last April, teachers and administrators met at a forum on the topic sponsored by *Rethinking Schools* and hosted by the Helen Bader Foundation, a Milwaukee-based organization with a strong interest in education. Those attending were asked how they thought multicultural and anti-racist education had fared in Milwaukee in the previous three to five years. Eleven answered it had declined a lot, five said it had declined a little or stayed the same, and two responded it had improved a little.

To understand how the teachers and staff arrived at their assessments, one must first go to the roots of a movement many once hoped would put Milwaukee permanently on the map as an innovator in multicultural education.

THE WORLD WAS CHANGING

Part of what makes the Milwaukee experience noteworthy is that the push for multicultural education came from both teachers and parents at the grassroots level and from top administrators in the district's central office. Further, the school board supported the effort.

"We felt that as the world was changing, Milwaukee was changing, and the school district was changing. We wanted to make sure our children weren't getting left behind in connection to the larger society," said Joyce Mallory, a former school board member.

At the grassroots level, a key role was played by district-funded, teacher-led councils, which allowed classroom teachers from across the city to network and share best practices. A particularly important role was played by the Multicultural Curriculum Council, which grew out of an in-service in January 1989 by Asa G. Hilliard III, a noted author on issues of race and education, who is now a professor of urban education at Georgia State University.

Although there is no one date that marks the beginning of the multicultural movement in Milwaukee, many point to that in-service by Hilliard as a key event. Then-Superintendent Robert Peterkin supported the move for multiculturalism and initiated two years of meetings and brainstorming sessions by teachers, parents, administrators, and community leaders on developing the district's curriculum goals.

In the 1991-92 school year, the Milwaukee district adopted its K-12 Teaching and Learning Initiatives. The first goal stated: "Students will project anti-racist, anti-biased attitudes through their participation in a multilingual, multi-ethnic, culturally diverse curriculum."

The significance of the K-12 Teaching and Learning Initiatives went beyond their content, however. For the first time, teachers felt that multiculturalism and anti-racist curriculum could be more than just something discussed in the hallways by small groups of teachers. Now, it was a policy developed with significant teacher and parent input and backed by the district.

"It [the need for multicultural education] was broadly laid out, the money was there and it was totally supported from the top down," said Linda Kreft, a staff development specialist who runs the MPS Resource Center and who at the time was a classroom teacher. "Because of that, you had big support from the schools."

Cynthia Ellwood, then an English teacher at South Division

Milwaukee's multicultural movement has devolved into what can be described as "pockets of multiculturalism."

High School recruited by the central administration to help implement the K-12 learning initiatives at a districtwide level, echoed that view. “Everywhere throughout the system there was a commitment to multiculturalism, and it came from the top,” said Ellwood. “There was a message out there that I think is lacking these days about how important this was.”

With backing from Deborah McGriff, deputy superintendent at the time, Ellwood used funding provided by the school board to provide books and other instructional materials as well as in-service training and workshops with experts in the field. She also brought a teacher’s sensitivity to her new position and insisted that teachers remain in the driver’s seat so that the program would not become another top-down initiative.

“I knew, as a teacher, that the answers were there among the teachers,” said Ellwood, who is now principal of the Hartford University Avenue School for Urban Explorations. “They understood what it would take better than those in central office.”

Kathy Swope, former co-chair of the Multicultural Curriculum Council who now is the Performance Assessment Coordinator for MPS, said that the “teacher-driven” component of the councils was crucial to effectively infusing multiculturalism throughout the district. “That was important because of the ownership, the level of commitment and the credibility of the work that was done by the councils.”

While the Multicultural Curriculum Council started with 12 to 18 schools, by 1995 the number of schools involved had jumped to 100, or about two-thirds of the district’s schools. Council members were responsible for attending meetings and workshops, then returning to spread the word among other teachers and staff at their schools. Goals of the council included training its members to be advocates for multicultural education, introducing teachers to national consultants, and putting a variety of resources into teachers’ hands.

In addition to the Multicultural Curriculum Council, the district had a number of other teacher-led councils, including the Whole Language Council, Early Childhood Council, and Humanities Council. Most of the councils also focused on providing staff development to promote multiculturalism.

DEFINING MULTICULTURALISM

One of the issues that immediately came to the fore was how to define multicultural education. “We were talking more about multicultural education and there were a lot of different views about what that meant,” said Steven Baruch, a retired MPS administrator who worked for the district’s human relations unit at the time.

Many on the Multicultural Curriculum Council argued for a perspective that went beyond merely acknowledging the different cultures within MPS. Kreft said that “by and large we held the definition that it was an education and reform movement — a philosophical viewpoint meeting the needs of students in a culturally diverse population.”

Swope was especially concerned that issues of power and race be addressed directly. “Multicultural education is not just including perspectives and insights and information from various cultures or groups,” said Swope. “It’s an ongoing process that empowers students to view the world from multiple perspectives and to understand the ongoing dynamics of this rapidly changing world.”

“The anti-racist component is included when you talk about empowering students to make changes in the world, to make criti-

cal judgments about justice and equity, and not to be complacent about the status quo or about historical omissions and distortions,” Swope said.

There was also the concern that multiculturalism not be viewed in a vacuum, but rather be seen as a thread running through all of the teacher-led councils. The Humanities Council, for example, sponsored an in-service session where teachers instructed their peers on innovative ways to teach novels by non-white authors.

In 1994, MPS teachers and staff, working with the Multicultural Curriculum Council, wrote an implementation guide for multicultural and anti-racist education. The guide gave detailed steps on how to implement a multicultural curriculum and examples of how to involve students in the concept.

“In addition to staff development, we were able to provide actual materials,” Swope said. “If a school wanted to infuse more multiculturalism into their mathematics curriculum, for example, someone from the council would provide sample lessons, strategies, and specific resources to help with that objective.”

While the councils made an impact, even supporters of the initiative say it was far from perfect. Implementing the number-one goal of the K-12 initiative was no easy task.

“We felt that a lot of exciting things would happen and a lot of them did,” Baruch said. “But as far as systemic reform, maybe we were trying to do too much in too many places.”

Paulette Copeland, a 24-year-MPS veteran who now heads the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, said the councils “were hoping that every school would put [multicultural, anti-racist curriculum] into their education plan and actually promote it, but it did not actually work. Schools wrote it out, but it was just a plan. There were no checks to see if you were actually carrying out your plan.”

A MASSIVE BLOW

In the spring of 1996, during the district’s budget process, the K-12 curriculum councils took a major hit when their budgets were eliminated.

“When the funding for the councils was no longer provided, the vehicle that allowed teachers from across the district to come together and to struggle with issues and to pool their knowledge was no longer there,” Swope said.

“It was really a massive blow to all of the councils and to the teachers,” added Kreft. “We could no longer have funds for anything — no money for speakers. And we no longer had funding to develop any kind of publications.”

Former Milwaukee School Board President Mary Bills said the district was under intense pressure to reduce property taxes and to look for programs to trim and cut. Although Bills had supported the councils, she felt she had no choice but to vote in favor of the cuts. “I think it was just easy pickings to be honest,” Bills said in a recent interview. “It didn’t have anything to do with the merit.”

At the same time, then-Superintendent Howard Fuller favored radically decentralizing many districtwide supports and services. The Curriculum and Instruction division at central office became a major target of the budget cutters. Council activities slowed dramatically when funding was cut for basic operating expenses, and for substitutes — who had made it possible for teachers to leave their classrooms and participate in in-service programs. Teachers who wanted to continue to participate in the councils had to do so on their own time.

Ellwood said the defunding “made a huge dent in the effect of the council. It became a smaller group of people supporting a common goal as opposed to a group of leaders who had resources to spend in supporting the whole district’s agenda.”

The Multicultural Curriculum Council continued meeting into 1998, Kreft said. “But we really found it very difficult to get speakers because everyone wanted a stipend and we had just more or less run out of steam.”

Another contributing factor to the demise of the councils was the district’s emphasis on the School-To-Work program, an initiative with strong support from central office. Funds that once went to the councils were directed to School-to-Work training and in-service sessions. Standards and testing also were getting attention at the local, state, and national levels.

“The emphasis changed over time and when people suddenly found that multicultural and anti-racist education were no longer at center stage. ... There was a redefinition of what was the most important goal,” said Baruch. “Everybody was talking about the standards, and the emphasis was now on how to raise test scores. You could see it happening and that’s where the money started to go and that’s where the emphasis went.”

POCKETS OF MULTICULTURALISM

The assessment of multiculturalism by Riverside students is important because Riverside is described in the district’s accountability report as “one of Milwaukee Public Schools’ most successful high schools.” It is also known for its multiracial student body — the school is 50 percent African Americans, 25 percent whites, 15 percent Latinos, and 7 percent Asians. Native Americans and those defined as “other” account for 3 percent.

When the students talked about the lack of emphasis on multicultural and anti-racist education at the school, one of the exceptions they mentioned frequently was English teacher Ashanti Hamilton, a 27-year-old African American teacher who is a Riverside alumnus.

Hamilton began the 1998-99 school year covering the routine curriculum — authors such as Ernest Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Stephen Crane. In the second half of the year, Hamilton decided to take the curriculum in another direction. “One of the first things we did was to have a discussion about what racism was, how it manifested itself, and how each of us has our own different set of prejudices,” he said.

Hamilton introduced the discussion by showing a 1993 episode from the NBC news program, “Dateline NBC.” The program, “True Colors,” followed two men, one African-American and one white, and chronicled their experiences trying to rent an apartment, purchase a car, hail a taxi, and secure a hotel room. The program, which documented the second-class treatment received by the African-American man, sparked discussion and emotion among his students.

Included in discussions in the weeks after the video was shown was talk of lynchings, the treatment of Native Americans, and the persecution of Jews and other people during Hitler’s Holocaust.

Discussions also included the Asian and Hispanic experiences and what it means to be bilingual in the United States. Hamilton also made sure he included positive examples of white Americans including abolitionists and Milwaukee’s own Father James Groppi, the late Catholic priest and civil rights activist.

For some of the students, the frank and open discussions were overwhelming, Hamilton said. “It was heart-wrenching,” Hamilton said. “There were tears and everything.”

Some of the white students “started to feel a little uncomfortable because they wanted to truly believe they were not like their parents,” Hamilton said. There was also an uncomfortable feeling among some African-American students who felt compelled to defend their white classmates during some of the heated discussions.

Hamilton had braced himself for calls and visits from parents, and they came.

“They complained that they didn’t consider this traditional American literature,” he said. When he explained the concept of his class to Riverside Principal Mary Ann Zapala, “she said ‘fine,’” Hamilton recalled and that she gave him her full support.

Contrary to what some parents thought, Hamilton saw multicultural and anti-racist education as a crucial part of the skills his students would need to succeed in life and not at all out of line with his responsibility as an English teacher. “One of the major purposes of literature, of language, of writing — everything this class is supposed to be about — is to cross barriers,” Hamilton said. “I felt like I would have done my white students a disservice if I didn’t put a mirror up to them. I would have done a disservice to my ethnic, minority students if I did not validate their American experience. And I would have really done myself a disservice if I didn’t teach them from a personal perspective.”

Chuck Cooney, a Riverside history teacher and a 22-year MPS veteran, says Hamilton will be sorely missed this school year. Hamilton has decided to pursue a law degree and will not return to Riverside.

Cooney is another example of how teachers have been able to interject multicultural, anti-racist material into the curriculum despite a decrease in the emphasis on multiculturalism from central office.

In the early 1990s, for instance, Cooney taught his students about the Fugitive Slave Act. Included in the lesson was the story of Sherman M. Booth, a Wisconsin abolitionist who organized a contingent of 5,000 abolitionists to rescue an escaped slave named Joshua Glover from a Milwaukee jail.

Booth was arrested and jailed several times for violating the Fugitive Slave Act. President James Buchanan finally pardoned him in 1861, and a Milwaukee street was named in his honor.

Cooney recalls telling one of his classes the story. “This kid, I don’t remember his name, raises his hand and says, ‘Why isn’t there a street named after that slave dude?’ I never thought of that question,” Cooney said.

Cooney, though, continued to raise the same question with his students every year and in 1994, one of his classes mounted a successful campaign to rename a Milwaukee street after Glover.

But teachers can’t be expected to interject such projects into the curriculum without training or without encouragement from the administration, Cooney said. “They won’t just do it unless they’re prodded.”

Cooney cited two other barriers to multicultural education. “A lot more of this kind of teaching would happen if teachers would

‘If adults don’t talk about race in Milwaukee, how can we create a community where everyone is valued?’
— Joyce Mallory

have the chance during the day to talk to one another,” he said. And like many other teachers throughout the district, Cooney cites the pressure on teachers to improve test scores. “I’ve never felt as much pressure to teach to a test as I have in the last five years.”

The pressures of testing and little time for preparation and developing new curriculum are also felt at the middle school and elementary levels, according to Milwaukee teachers.

Brenda Harvey came to Milwaukee five years ago and worked as a fifth-grade teacher at Hartford and, most recently, as an administrator at Garden Homes Elementary.

“I came here from Raleigh, N.C., and I was really impressed with the number-one teaching goal,” said Harvey referring to the stated emphasis on a multilingual, multi-ethnic, culturally diverse curriculum. “I came here with a lot of high hopes.”

Harvey said she never thought the interjection of race and culture into her classroom was at conflict with her duty to prepare her students academically. “Certainly, I expected them to know math and the scientific process...,” Harvey said. “I also expected them to know what it means to be a functioning, educated person in an urban setting.”

“Both as a teacher and as an administrator, I believe in demanding excellence,” Harvey said. “I don’t have a problem with the use of standards to achieve excellence. But when we look at most of the standards, we find that they are reflective of a narrow, white, mono-ethnic perspective. The standards that are used in most cases are not indicators of meaningful learning.”

At issue, Harvey said, is the degree of force with which standards are being pushed to the forefront at the expense of multiculturalism. “The passion is placed into standards and accountability,” she said adding that during her last year at Hartford, she felt “the

standards piece breathing down my back the most.”

School Board President Bruce Thompson, first elected in April 1997, said until he sees actual proof that a multicultural curriculum helps prepare students academically, he will continue the emphasis on standards, accountability, and testing.

“I haven’t seen any examination of how effective it is,” Thompson said, adding that he is concerned that such an emphasis “can take away

from the kind of skills students will need to succeed in mainstream society.” He also voiced concern that students would “get short-changed on literature that’s part of our overall culture.”

Thompson said it’s hard to have candid discussions about race for fear of “saying the wrong things. The problem is that there are so many dangers of talking about it. It’s very hard to [ask], ‘Why do we have this performance gap?’”

RACE IS CRUCIAL

But no matter how painful, it’s critical that race be talked about rather than ignored, said Mallory, the former school board member who is now the director of Start Smart, an organization that focuses on promoting awareness around early childhood issues.

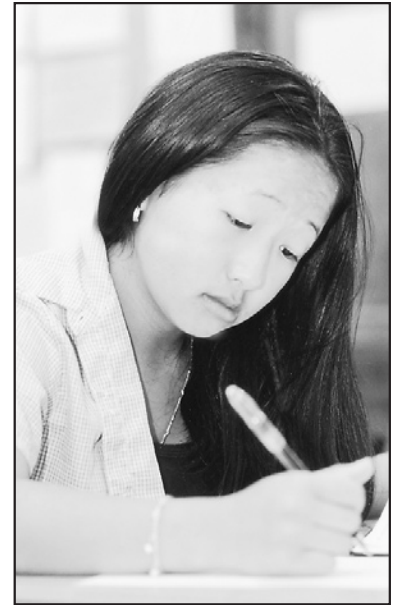
“If adults don’t talk about race in Milwaukee, how can we create a community where everyone is valued?” asked Mallory.

“To think that doing well on a test is all the skills young people are going to need is foolhardy,” she said. “If you look at one of the primary skills employers want people to have, it’s the ability to get along with people from different backgrounds and different orientations.”

Mallory said that the school board she served on did not want multicultural and anti-racism education to come at the expense of the rest of the curriculum. But rather it was to be woven in to bolster the rigor of what was being taught.

“I didn’t see it as fluff then, and I don’t see it as fluff now,” said Mallory. “Personally if I had a child in the MPS today, I would still see it as important, particularly for children of color. Racism and all those other ‘isms’ haven’t gone away.” ■

Curtis Lawrence is a Chicago-based journalist who has written extensively about education.



Susan Lina Ruggles

QUOTABLE QUOTE

“The multiculturalism I have been seeking is a serious scholarship that includes all American peoples and challenges the traditional master narrative of American history.

“The traditional master narrative we’ve learned in our schools says that this country was founded by Americans of European ancestry and that our ideas are rooted in Western civilization. But when we just look around at ourselves, we realize that not all of us came from Europe. Many of us came from Africa and Latin America, and others were already here in North America. And others, like my grandfather, came from a Pacific shore. It is not only more inclusive, but also more accurate to recognize this diversity.

“The intellectual purpose of multiculturalism is a more accurate understanding of who we are as Americans.”

– Ronald Takaki

author of *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*
and *A Larger Memory: A History of Our Diversity, With Voices.*

When *Small* Is Beautiful

■ AN INTERVIEW WITH HÉCTOR CALDERÓN BY CATHERINE CAPELLARO

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, New York, is an example of how education and community organizing can both serve the needs of a neighborhood. The academy, located in the Williamsburg neighborhood, serves 160 students, 80 percent of whom are Latino.

The school shares a mission with the community organization that created it: to nurture leadership for peace and justice. Students participate in an integrated curriculum where they take elective arts courses that are based on an overriding school-wide theme. Themes at the academy have included asthma, sugar, biodiversity, technology, and empowerment.

Luis Garden Acosta and a group of community activists who were concerned about high levels of poverty and violence in Williamsburg founded the organization called El Puente in 1982. El Puente, which means “the bridge” in Spanish, bridges the arts, health, environment, and education.

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice was one of 40 schools founded in a five-year period by grants from the New Visions Foundation when Joseph Fernandez was chancellor. Fernandez invited unions, parents, and community groups to start public schools.

Héctor Calderón, principal at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, says he was deeply influenced by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and by students who were frustrated by education that seemed removed from their daily lives. He says his involvement with El Puente has helped him realize his vision for creating a kind of education that could help students “get the most out of school and out of life.”

Despite the fact that 59 percent of Williamsburg’s kids live below the poverty line and 90 percent of El Puente’s students are eligible for free and reduced-price school lunches, 80 percent of them graduated in four years in 2001.

Calderon spoke recently with Catherine Capellaro, managing editor of Rethinking Schools.

Q: How did El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice come to be?

A: El Puente as a leadership center has been around since 1982. But in 1993 we had the unique opportunity to envision what a school could look like. We had been successful in developing training for young people to become leaders in peace and justice. The heart of our mission is to inspire and nurture leadership. Kids did activities here: dancing, mural painting, or doing community health and environment internships. We engaged young people in a dialogue about this kind of life, this way of being. We were coming from



JOE MATUNIS

Héctor Calderón, principal at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice.

the perspective of potential, rather than deficit. In most organizations, young people have to have a problem: They’re drug addicts, or pregnant teens, or they have to identify themselves as something of a problem to get help. We wanted to shift that perspective and wanted to say, “OK, let’s talk about your issues from the perspective of where you want to go, from the perspective of your potential.”

There’s an old saying that goes, “It takes a village to raise a child.” We said, if it takes a village to raise a child, why not help raise the village? That was the mission that Luis Garden Acosta along with Frances Lucerna, two of the co-founders of El Puente, the organization, decided to embark upon. We took a lot of the ideas we had developed in the leadership center (the after-school program) to the academy. We

tried to create a seamless program that would start at 8:00 in the morning and end at 8:00 at night.

Q: How does the school develop leaders for peace and justice?

A: There’s a four-year vision. When we create our curriculum, the fundamental question that we try to answer is “Who am I?” So all curricula in the ninth grade has that as a central theme. In global studies, in English, in math, in science, they all are trying to figure out who they are. For example, if I’m a history teacher, then you understand yourself historically, culturally. In English, we look at literature that deals with questions of identity. We read a lot of books, from *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, to *Bodega Dreams*, to *Drown* by Juno Diaz, coming of age stories that young people can identify with because the experiences resemble their own. There is study in science of self, which is biology, where they discover themselves as biological beings. They study life from conception to development and life around them. In math, you’re also writing your personal narratives and experiences with mathematics. How have you experienced math?

Q: This must take an enormous amount of coordination among teachers. How do you pull it all together?

A: There were three things that we realized early on, three conceptual frameworks or tenets that we abide by. One was that disciplines came out of the needs and experiences of people. Whether you’re teaching math, science, history, language—all of them were created because there were real community needs. We say that if disciplines came out of the needs and experiences of people, why are we separating community or community organizing from school?

The second tenet is that knowledge in its natural state is holistic. In most schools, you learn math here, you learn English here, you learn history here. It loses the synergy between the disciplines. How do they speak to each other? That translates into questions from young people, like “Why are we doing this?” “How is this connected to what I’m learning in history?” So kids might be doing essays in English, for example, and we give them an essay in history and they’re like “Whoa, why are we doing this here?” That’s because there’s a loss of those connections. There are larger connections at the conceptual level, like how the theme of identity goes through all the subject areas. Young people begin to see how each of the disciplines speak to it.

The last tenet is the Freireian idea of education for liberation. By liberation we mean the struggle to become fully human. We say that because at some level we are born fully human, but because of dehumanizing conditions—particularly for young people of color—they experience a lack of affordable housing, lack of health care, lack of access to good education, to things we need to help us develop in a way that allows us to become fully human. That struggle is a struggle for liberation. And I think schools have a profound obligation and duty to really allow young people to become fully developed and nurtured, to become the best they can be.

Q: What does that look like in practice?

A: One example is the sugar project, which began in 1996 and 1997. We were looking at trying to create an integrated arts project. It’s a way of really infusing the arts throughout the curriculum and at the same time letting the disciplines speak to community issues, particularly because of the history of Williamsburg, where Domino Sugar is four or five blocks away from the school. At one point Domino Sugar distributed 50 percent of the United States’ sugar. It was refined right at this plant. Many of the parents of the young people who came here worked at some point or another at Domino Sugar. We wanted to take the issue of sugar and look at it as a collaboration between community artists, organizers, academy facilitators, as a way of integrating language arts, history, government, visual arts, dance, and music. We looked at the history of sugar and how it came from Europe and the history of slavery—to really create something rich and profound as a subject of study.

We looked at the implications of sugar. If I was a chemistry teacher, I was looking at the composition of sugar and the chemical structures that make up sugar. History teachers looked at the history of slavery in the sugar plantations in the Caribbean and throughout the South. The health class looked at the effects of sugar, particularly in the crisis of obesity. The economics teacher was looking at the labor of sugar: the Domino sugar factory and their use of labor in this country, the wages that people get paid, and who got to work there. Students did a lot of oral history projects with former Domino workers.

All these ideas and projects culminated in an outdoor performance at our community garden where we recreated a lot of these things, the history of sugar, the effects of sugar. It became a carnival-like procession complete with stilt-walkers, performed through the streets of the community. The whole community came out and really just embraced the project. It was a great way of bridging the community and the work that we were doing. All the integrated arts projects have that as a final component.

Q: What is the current theme at El Puente Academy?



JOE MATUNIS

A: This year the project is health. As part of that we’re looking at Radiac Research Corporation. Radiac is a low-level nuclear waste disposal plant, the only one in New York State—a block away from the school. If anything were to ever happen in that place, it would release a toxic cloud that would engulf all of Williamsburg and parts of lower Manhattan. We want to stop the permit this year for Radiac operating the plant on the waterfront.

Williamsburg reads like a “Who’s Who of Environmental Hazards.” We have the Williamsburg Bridge, we have the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, where cars are constantly emitting carbon monoxide into the air. We also have a nuclear plant right here. Every year, one project we do is to measure the level of particulates, and students look at the health effects of these particulates.

We also have one of the biggest underground oil spills, bigger than the Exxon Valdez. It’s still spilling; they can’t stop it; it’s underground and it’s been ongoing. We are part of what they call “the lead belt” and the “the asthma belt.”

Asthma is a huge issue in this community. Through the Community Health and Environment Group, which is an organizing arm of El Puente, our students are doing surveys of the level of asthma in this community. We count within a 10-block radius and identify many families as having asthma. As part of the work, we try to provide extra services to those families. Biology takes on another dimension for our students when they’re studying the respiratory system and they are looking at asthma and how it affects that population.

One of the things that the health coordinator at El Puente did was help students look at the Dominican and Puerto Rican populations that live primarily in the south side of Williamsburg. We found out that there is a higher incidence of asthma in Puerto Ricans. Then we tried to find out why that was. We looked at natural remedies that Dominicans use that may not be as prevalent in the Puerto Rican population. We had a whole presentation of this and it was really fascinating. That report was published in a health journal. It was really the first time that a community-based organization’s work was actually published in a medical journal. This is what we mean by community knowledge, really engaging in this kind of work that we feel is important.



JOE MATUNIS

Student mural painters from El Puente.

Q: How are themes developed, proposed, or selected?

A: Usually we bring together a lot of people, a team of stakeholders who are thinking about different things. It's usually co-facilitators, community-based organization folks. We come together in a room and we throw out ideas. It's a gestation process. And then we pick a theme based on our conversation. This year it was really, really interesting. We had a more community-based organization piece where we got all the communities of El Puente: the academy; the community organization; the Beacon program, which deals with *Puentitos* (ages 7-12); and Bushwick Center. Bushwick is a community next door to Williamsburg. We all came together and there were three questions: What do you think is the greatest issue affecting our communities? Which issue are you personally invested in? What is the issue you feel you have the greatest capacity to influence? For example, the issue I felt was facing our community is gentrification. Personally, I was invested in the issue of police brutality. And, lastly, I think the greatest place where the public can influence and really change things is the environment. I think there were enough of those common answers around, and that's how we chose the idea of the health/environment theme.

Once the theme is chosen, a group of facilitators/artists begins to brainstorm different angles and takes on the issue. Classes are developed. We have what we call educational options. A lot of those classes directly speak to the integrated arts project. The design team really is the glue that keeps all the different things together. They decide what the culminating piece will look like and, ultimately, they will keep the curriculum tight and together so that everybody is on board with the work that we're trying to do.

Q: How does the size of El Puente contribute to being able to implement curriculum like you're describing?

A: Size is definitely a key. On one level, it's great that I can go to any of my students. I know their names, who they are, where they live, the families they come from. I know something about what they're personally invested in. If you're putting a curriculum forward that deals with community,

one of the key factors for any organizer is to know your community. What are they invested in? What are their self-interests? Being small allows us to really create the kind of close-knit communities that we have. It allows us to really serve the interests of our young people.

If we were larger, we could do this kind of work, but it would clearly be more difficult to be as attuned as we are to our young people. Size really matters—and it matters because I can go to staff and coordinate in ways that if I had a larger staff would be much harder. We also have a whole complementary group of people that are honorary staff people who are part of the community-based organization. They also integrate with us in the work that we do.

Q: How tied to the standards and Regents does El Puente have to be?

A: The work that we do is very rigorous and it hits a lot of the standards that are put out there for subject areas. For example, in an economics class, students are looking at lending practices of banks in our neighborhood. They talk about redlining. That project became a part of creating a report in which we disaggregated data by race, class, gender, and geography and looked at the disparity in lending practices. They took that to the city council. I think all of that requires rigorous learning. We give Regents, but for me, it's not the only gauge. We also do portfolio assessments in which we tie those assessments closer to the curriculum that we're teaching. So students have to take all the Regents that they would have to take at any other school. They also have to pass at a level of competence in each of six portfolios.

Q: How do you define "rigor"?

A: If you can really find answers to fundamental problems that are plaguing the community, that is rigorous. It takes a lot of work, a lot of effort. People understand that the work we are doing is explicitly tied to bettering the community.

Q: What does a school for social justice mean to you? Why do you think this orientation is important?

A: Schools were meant to address a need within the community, a need to educate people. Why would we want to educate our young people? Clearly, every generation must build on the next generation. With us it's about educating young people who don't understand the fundamental responsibility to the world and the environment in which they live.

Whether we're using the arts to get there or you're using the sciences to get there, we *all* as citizens of the world have a responsibility to make the world we live in much better. The Native Americans talk about building for seven generations. I think, in many ways, schools have really become about educating the self, devoid of community.

A lot of schools think they've done their mission if they educate kids who go to Harvard and become great at whatever they do. We want our kids to go to the best schools. We want them to have access to a great education. But we also ask the fundamental question: For the sake of what? For the sake of what are we educating our young people? It has to do with this sacred covenant that we have with the world around us. We have a moral and civil obligation to really make the world a better place. To me, the idea of social justice is not some pie-in-the-sky thing: It begins with our students. It begins in daily acts, in understanding the connection between what they learn in school and the community they live in. It begins in practical applications of their knowledge to better the world they live in. ■

Bargaining for Better Schools

One union works for meaningful small school reform



MELINDA BECK

■ BY DIANA PORTER

Even after my first week, I knew something was different about Hughes Center, a collection of five small, urban academies where I became the program facilitator in 1994.

I saw teams using their daily team planning periods to compare course passing rates and in-school suspension rates. Team leaders conferred about best practices and the instructional leadership team discussed curriculum and student achievement.

I felt reinvigorated. My eight-year experience as the lead teacher for a small school-within-a-school had left me

Diana Porter (porterd@cinci.rr.com) taught for 32 years in the Cincinnati Public Schools. For the last 11 years, she has worked as program facilitator of the High School for Teaching and Technology at Hughes Center. She has served on the executive board for the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers for 29 years.

doubting high school reform was possible. I had worked with an enthusiastic and dedicated staff, who, like Sisyphus, daily pushed the boulder of high school reform up a mountain of red tape.

The Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (AFT local #1520) has worked hard to defy the stereotype of unions as obstacles to school reform. I was the collective bargaining chair when we negotiated our first collaborative contract after joint district/union training from the Harvard Negotiations Project in 1988. We negotiated a contract with a differentiated pay scale for lead teachers through a Career in Teaching Program. Lead teachers were identified through a rigorous evaluation process that looked at both their classroom instruction and their school and district leadership. Once lead teachers were identified, they could apply for lead teacher positions that opened every two years. A panel of four teachers working directly with this lead teacher and the building adminis-

trator interviewed candidates and chose the one that would work with them for two years. Because lead teachers had greater responsibility, attended many more meetings, and worked at least five days beyond the school year, they were paid \$5,000 a year above their regular salaries. Team leaders, department heads, program facilitators, and peer evaluators were designated as lead teacher positions. Here is the language from the contract:

170. Professional Development

1. Career in Teaching Program

The CFT and the Board are both committed to improving the profession of teaching. A profession offers opportunities for professional growth, involvement in decision-making, communication and collaboration, and increased responsibilities and accountability. By implementing change in the organization of schools, teachers will have the opportunity to take on greater responsibilities which

will bring with it greater status, higher salary, opportunities to collaborate, as well as leadership roles to improve instruction and student achievement. The parties also view a career ladder as a way to give incentives to attract and keep quality teachers in the profession. To this end, we have established the Career in Teaching Program.

School-Within-a-School

This new contract also contained a provision that allowed neighborhood comprehensive high schools to apply to become a high school reform project affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). I was on the high school reform subcommittee with a high school principal and the two of us worked together on this proposal. Once the contract was settled, I became one of the first lead teachers in the district and transferred to Woodward High School in a predominately African-American low-income neighborhood.

In my second year as the lead teacher, the faculty voted to join CES. A school leadership team went through national training and the next fall, we launched the Essential Studies Program, a school-within-a-school. Teachers voluntarily transferred from the neighborhood school to this new program. A summer institute built professional development and team planning time into the school schedule. The Ohio State Department of Education awarded us a \$125,000 “venture capital” grant and we also secured funding from private foundations. We formed interdisciplinary teams and randomly assigned students to these teams. An energized faculty poured ourselves into personalizing education and creating projects to actively engage students to stem the tide of ninth grade failure and dropouts. I remember the Christopher Columbus project my ninth graders did in world history and English. The students held a press conference on the 500th anniversary of Columbus arrival to raise critical questions about our state’s celebration of this event. The energized students saw the power of community organizing and they developed skills like writing letters, writing press releases, and making follow-up calls to the media.

Despite successes like these, pressures like the implementation of high-stakes tests in ninth grade and budget woes began to take their toll. The state was in the process of defining state standards and each new academic year brought substantially revised standards.

Teachers began to tire of the constant reinventing of projects to teach to the shifting state standards.

Because of budget problems, we had to eliminate counseling positions to reduce class sizes. Teams at our school had agreed to take over the scheduling of students since our team-based block schedule required little work to schedule and the teachers felt they knew the students better and could give them more support in post-secondary choices. The counselors fought this decision and got the district involved. (This whole drama can be seen in John Merrow’s PBS special “The Fifty Million dollar Gamble” (www.shoppbs.org/product/index.jsp?productId=1405198)).

We did improve student attendance, course passage rates, and the grade-level promotion rate. And we started to send more graduates on to two- and four-year colleges. But Cincinnati’s lone high school reform project did not have the clout either to win exemptions to dis-

Many of these reforms were painful, especially the minimizing of fine arts courses.

trictwide mandates or to change them. There were scheduling and discipline problems between the “coalition kids” and the neighborhood school students who did not get any of the benefits of the small school structure. The principal, who had been so supportive in starting the initiative, was suddenly promoted to superintendent for our district. The new principal appointed to Woodward wasn’t sure that this reform model was in the interest of the students in this school. Although the union contract had created this school, there was no language in the contract to provide a supportive structure or resources. Without supportive leadership, it didn’t take long for the boulder to start rolling downhill and I had to choose between staying and being crushed by it or accepting a transfer to another school.

Small School Reform: Take Two

With my experience in small schools reform, I was recruited by the teachers in the program to become the program facilitator of one of the five small, urban

academies at Hughes Center. The population of the five schools that make up Hughes Center is 1,450 students. Ninety-six percent of the students are African American and 65 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

My new school, the High School for Teaching and Technology, serves 270 students and has a mission to “grow our own” teachers. It was created by the union, the district, and the University of Cincinnati College of Education. These organizations were responding to the shortage of teachers, especially African-American teachers. According to a 2003 National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future report, individuals of African-American, Hispanic and Latino, Asian, and Native American descent make up 14 percent of K–12 teachers, while 36 percent of students are from such backgrounds.

Shortly after my appointment, the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers negotiated a contract that included a process by which schools could become “team-based” schools. All five programs at Hughes voted to become team-based under the following contract provisions:

Section 145: Team Based Schools

2a. Team Composition

The team must consist of 3-5 teachers sharing a common group of students. Four teachers on a team is the preferred structure.

2b. Team Leaders

Each teaching team in a team-based school shall have a paid team leader (\$6,000 if a lead teacher in the Career-in-Teaching program, \$3,000 if not). The team leader’s duties include, but are not limited to, the following: serves as instructional leader of the team, represents the team on the ILT (site-based management council); conducts team meetings; mentors and coaches team members; submits team meeting minutes and quarterly reports to the principal; coordinates the analysis of student achievement data; facilitates the implementation of the Standards in Practice process; and facilitates team communication with parents.

4a. Team Rights and Responsibilities

A team shall be responsible for educating its students to help them meet or exceed the promotion standards for that level. The team shall determine instructional methods, consistent with the school’s adopted program focus, if any, and shall determine how to group and schedule students for instruction in the subjects covered by the team. The team

shall determine disciplinary procedures consistent with the district's Code of Conduct and the Local School Behavior Plan. Continuity in student-teacher relationships shall be a primary consideration.

We organized our schedule into an eight-period day with two daily preparation periods—a personal and a team preparation period. It became very important to build team time into the daily schedule because teams had just been given so many more responsibilities. The first year, we were given paid team training where we learned how to conduct efficient meetings, improve communications, and resolve conflicts.

Each team had a paid lead teacher as a team leader who proved to be very important to the success of teams. The team leaders were compensated for the time they gave up daily during their personal preparation period. They often sacrificed their preparation period to telephone calls, following up on paperwork, or meeting with parents, students, or teachers. Since lead teachers are compensated for this time, they can be held accountable for the work required beyond the traditional classroom responsibilities. I meet with my team leaders to analyze data such as attendance, course failure, or test passage rates. This helps us to constantly adjust and fine tune our planning and instruction.

The instructional leadership team (ILT) meets bi-weekly to talk about curriculum and instructional issues that concern all five programs in the school. The ILT is the group that oversees the team configuration and votes to approve any curriculum changes in the school. Each team is represented on the ILT by their team leader and the subject-area leaders. Other ILT members include parents, non-teaching staff, and administration. The union contract also included provisions for setting up the ILTs:

150. Instructional Leadership Team

1. a Role of the ILT

Instructional Leadership Team (ILTs) shall be established so that the principal, teachers, and other members may share leadership and make decisions in the following areas:

- To develop, review, and evaluate the instructional program
- To monitor and improve school operations and procedures that impact on instruction
- To plan and monitor training of staff
- To develop and monitor school budget

- To create and maintain a safe and orderly school environment
- To oversee the formation of teams, in team-based schools, within given parameters

Team Responsibilities

Our team-based structure allows us to keep students for two years so that we can know them and their parents well. In our school, there is no “office,” so the team is responsible to follow through with discipline issues in a timely manner. It also means that when teachers call parents, they can report on their academic achievement as well as their behavior issues.

The union contract created an in-school suspension option where individual teachers have the right to send disruptive students to an in-school suspension room for the remainder of the instruction period. We created a Saturday-morning school run by the principal and a teacher who is paid to

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work each Saturday, although teachers sometimes volunteer to help if a large number of students are assigned. This gave us another option for dealing with discipline-related problems before suspending students. Teams are given the responsibility of suspending students if all teachers agree. They take care of the paperwork and contact the parents.

We have continued to increase achievement and, in fact, made “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind act last year. Despite the fact that we’re in a period of transition to a new, more rigorous 10th grade state exit exam, we have been able to create some wonderful interdisciplinary projects. We have an American Idol project where students perform songs or raps about the causes of World War II, videotape them, and design CD covers and liner notes. Students are master-

ing standard deviation in math by studying the results of standardized testing and college admissions. Despite the changing state standards, many teachers have found ways to teach to the standards through creative projects.

Painful Choices

In order to reduce class sizes, our school took advantage of the student-based budgeting that a joint committee of teachers and administration had worked collaboratively to create. Through this process, we could be more flexible with staffing at the building level. Teams generally have 80 to 100 students and four teachers (plus a part- or full-time special educator to work with students with individualized education plans). At our school we traded in two assistant principals and three counselors to create a lead teacher position for each of the five schools and reduce class size. We also voluntarily reduced our foreign language offerings to only Spanish and then required two years for all students. We also cut back to the minimum art, music and physical education offerings.

Many of these reforms were painful, especially the minimizing of fine arts courses. Now, in year six of these reforms, the state of Ohio named us a “school of promise” because we met AYP this year in our school of more than 60 percent low-income and 94 percent African-American students. We are also seeing an increase in the number of students who go to two- and four-year colleges and who are interested in pursuing the career focus of the program.

In an urban district, any reform is tenuous at best. Our school is threatened with closing and we are constantly forced to be very creative with the budget to make ends meet. The program facilitators of each of the five schools only teach two periods instead of the usual six. To pay for this, we went from three assistant principals to one. Now, 10 years later, our principal is tired of covering every football game and is retiring and requesting more administrative help for the next principal.

With the protection of our union contract, I am sure that this current crisis will bring changes but will not compromise the team-based structure we have created here at Hughes. I don't know how it will turn out, but I do know that the union contract helps us move the boulder of small school reform up the hill. And our team-based structure will help it from rolling backwards. ■

Creating Democratic

A democratic school culture is the best professional development Schools

■ BY DEBORAH MEIER

The school change we need cannot be undertaken by a faculty that is not convinced and involved. Even when teachers are engaged, it's tough to change the habits of a lifetime, embedded as such habits are in the way we talk about schooling and the way our students and their families expect it to be delivered. Such a task must be the work of the participants themselves in a climate of self-governance.

The kinds of change required by today's agenda can only be the work of thoughtful teachers. Either we acknowledge and create conditions based on this fact, conditions for teachers to work collectively and collaboratively and openly, or we create conditions that encourage resistance, secrecy, and sabotage. Teachers who believe in spelling tests every Friday or are "hooked on phonics" sneak them in, even when they're taboo. And so do those who want good books or fewer workbooks, regardless of school regulations. The braver and more conscientious cheat the most, but even the timid can't practice well what they don't believe in. This is obviously an argument for why these schools must be small.

Even if we're talking only about individual classrooms, size is important. But, if we're talking about the creation of a thoughtful school culture, size becomes decisive—especially if we're trying to create a changed culture. Thoughtfulness is time-consuming. Collaboration is time-consuming. The time they both consume can't be private

time, late-at-night-at-home time. To find time for thoughtful discussion we need to create schools in which consensus is easy to arrive at while argument is encouraged (even fostered) and focused on those issues of teaching and learning close to teacher and student experiences, rather than on procedural rules and processes, elections and nominating committees, building-wide disciplinary codes, detention policies, filling out forms and checklists, scheduling, etc.

Only in a small school can deep ongoing discussion take place in ways that produce change and involve the entire faculty—and even there, it's tough to sustain. For teachers to start thinking through the task before them, collectively and collaboratively, schools must be so small that governance does not become the topic of discussion but issues of education do, so small that the faculty as a whole becomes the decision-making body on questions of teaching and learning.

We bragged for years that the Central Park East (CPE) schools didn't have a single permanent committee. We were a committee of the whole; the time we spent talking had immediate repercussions affecting the way we thought and felt about children, classroom life, our teaching practices. If an issue arose we could meet with almost no notice, and gather together in one room, around one table or one circle, and hear each other out. We didn't need complex governing structures, committees of committees, representatives of representatives, differentiations of staff, classes and subclasses.

And even though on the high school level we now do have one permanent committee (our Cabinet), anyone can join any of its meetings—even kids if they wish. (It would be nice if they did more often.) A third of the faculty is in

the Cabinet, which only occasionally takes a vote. Mostly we argue it out and find a solution that all can live with for the time being. We avoid deciding issues better decided elsewhere. And anyone can insist that decisions made by the Cabinet can be reviewed at a schoolwide meeting.

This continuing dialogue, face to face, over and over, is a powerful educative force. It is our primary form of staff development. When people ask me how we "train" new teachers, I say that the school itself is an educator for the kids and staff; it's its own staff development project. And it is by this same token always accessible to the outside world as well as to our students; the school itself is a public deliberative body whose existence is a reminder of the power of reasoning, reflecting, assessing, revising, and planning. The habits of mind, our five essential questions, and the habits of work we encourage in our students are thus exemplified in the daily life of the staff. We too weigh evidence, explore alternative viewpoints, conjecture about other possibilities, make connections, and ask, So what? We too must meet deadlines and keep our word and communicate clearly. We're "demonstrating" the value of what we preach—daily.

The staff spends all year reviewing its 14 graduation requirements, and each fall comes up with new versions of one or another of them. The experience of our alumni/ae, of external visitors, the work of our colleagues across the nation, as well as our own daily practice, all lead to such revisions. At various steps along the way the latest drafts are circulated and debated by students and teachers. We added a new section on computer literacy after considerable debate on whether it should be a part of our requirements or a separate one.

Deborah Meier, founder of successful small schools in New York and Boston, is author of The Power of Their Ideas. Reprinted from The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons from a Small School in Harlem, by Deborah Meier. Copyright © 1995 by Deborah Meier. By permission of Beacon Press, www.beacon.org.



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Recently we added an emphasis on experimental science and redrafted the math requirements to reflect the latest National Council of Teachers of Math (NCTM) standards.

Similarly, issues of behavior, school management, and student-teacher relations occupy our attention. We spend a good deal of time—even an embarrassing amount of time—debating student “dress codes,” mostly shall they or shan’t they be allowed to wear hats. But even this issue was argued on terms that allowed students to join us. People brought in articles about the impact of clothes and raised issues about the importance (or not) of worrying about how others see us and whether our informality would make it harder for

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kids to shift to more formal ways of dressing in more formal workplaces. The opponents of dress codes eventually won, but supporters occasionally still submit interesting pieces of evidence for their side.

In a small school we can dare to experiment without feeling we are treating kids like guinea pigs. After all, what doesn’t work isn’t irreversible. We can reschedule one afternoon and put a new agenda into practice the next morning. We can undo them just as fast. Changes don’t require Herculean coordination or time-consuming bureaucratic arranging. In short, smallness makes democracy feasible, and without democracy we won’t be able to create the kind of profound rethinking the times demand. ■

Getting to the Heart of Quality Teaching

“Teacher quality” has become almost as popular a buzzword as “student achievement.”

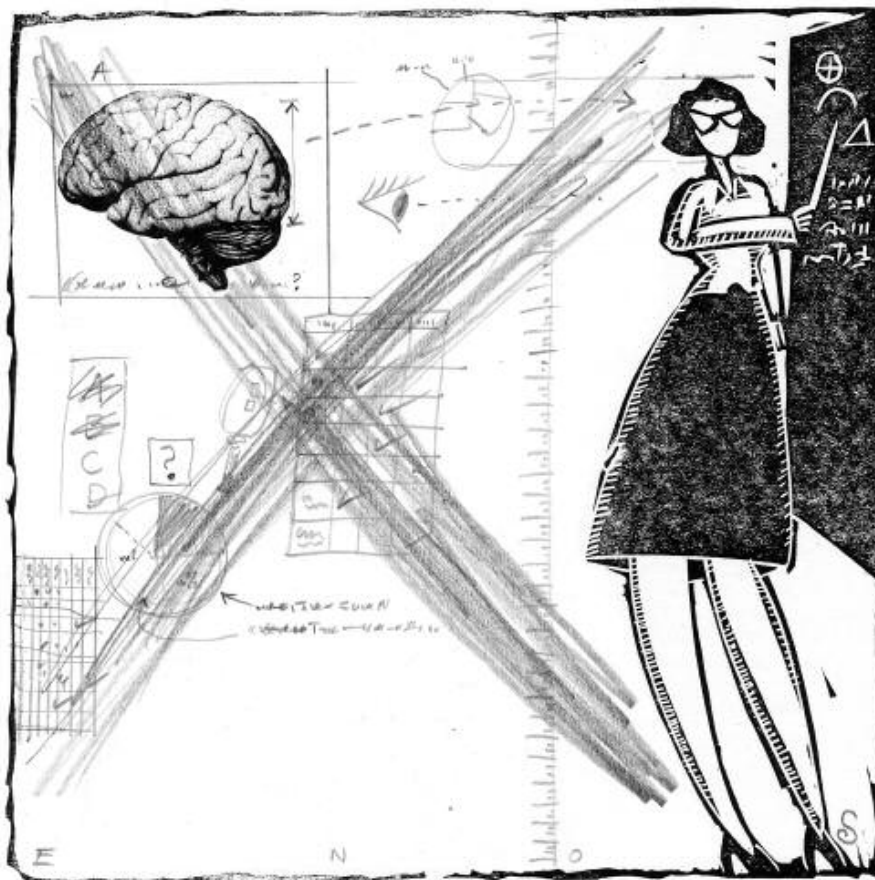
But what constitutes a quality teacher? Credentials? Experience? Classroom performance? Test scores? Parent satisfaction?

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) assumes that quality can be guaranteed by requiring that all teachers be fully certified. But the connection between formal credentials and effective classroom performance has always been problematic. NCLB does not provide the resources needed to improve teacher preparation. And NCLB’s obsessive testing regime tends to deskill teachers, discourages committed teachers from staying in the profession, and degrades classroom practice in ways that contribute to educational failure.

Some private school voucher proponents, like those behind Milwaukee’s voucher program—the oldest in the nation—argue that the “free market” and “parental choice” are sufficient to ensure quality. A person can teach in one of Milwaukee’s 125 publicly funded private schools without even a high school diploma.

In another nod to the “free market,” some people promote a constellation of “alternate” routes to certification as a way of improving teacher quality. Some non-university-based programs are worthy efforts to educate thoughtful and imaginative teachers. Others resemble the unregulated voucher free-for-all and have produced some highly unqualified teachers. In some locations, poorly prepared alternate-route teachers are being used by administrators as an argument for more prescriptive “teacher proof” approaches to instruction.

The currently popular “silver bullet” solutions to teacher quality aren’t working. Teacher quality can’t be jump started by top-down mandates, scripted programs, or pay for performance. Nor will teacher quality be generated through NCLB testing or teacher bashing in the media. Such approaches ignore fundamental issues of resources, teacher leadership, teaching and learning conditions, and the need for much more time



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for teachers to collaborate, assess student progress, and improve their teaching skills.

Districts, schools of education, unions, and legislatures all have a role to play in improving teacher quality. The time has come to stop viewing teachers as a problem and instead treat them as professionals deserving of respect, with important insights in how to improve the classroom.

A Real and Unequal Crisis

There is an undeniable crisis in the teaching profession, one that reflects broader social inequities. Some of the “big picture” issues involve recruitment and retention of new teachers, equitable distribution of the most qualified teachers, and increasing the number of teachers of color. For example:

■ A million veteran teachers are nearing retirement, yet many school districts

have difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers. According to the National Education Association, 20 percent of all new hires leave the classroom within three years. In urban districts, the numbers are worse; close to 50 percent of newcomers leave within their first five years.

■ Poor children are the most likely to be taught by the newest and least-qualified teachers. A 2003 study by the Texas State Board for Educator Certification, for instance, found that schools with a majority of black students had four times as many uncertified teachers in English and math than schools with few blacks.

■ While students of color make up about 40 percent of public school enrollment, only 16 percent of public school teachers are teachers of color. An estimated 38 percent of public schools did not have a single teacher of

color in the 1999–2000 school year, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics. Yes, white teachers can successfully teach students from other racial and ethnic groups. But if students rarely—if ever—see a teacher of color, or if teachers of color feel isolated and/or burdened by being “the only” in their schools, educational quality suffers.

The ability to solve these “big picture” issues is directly tied to how we define and foster quality teaching.

Defining ‘Quality’

NCLB formally defines a highly qualified teacher as someone who has a certificate to teach in the area he or she is teaching. In practice, the federal law’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements define a quality teacher as someone who can prep students to score well on standardized tests. In some cases, this means unquestioningly adhering to a scripted curriculum. In others it means substantially altering the curriculum to prepare for tests that are a flawed measurement of a narrow set of skills and that discriminate against students on the basis of language and culture. Many fine teachers have left the classroom rather than face

ty and excellence in education, Rethinking Schools has promoted a vision of quality teaching based on what we call social justice teaching. This vision, first articulated in the introduction to *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1*, urges teachers to pursue instructional practice that is:

- Grounded in the lives of our students
- Critical
- Multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice
- Participatory, experiential
- Hopeful, visionary
- Activist
- Academically rigorous
- Culturally and linguistically sensitive

These characteristics reflect an appreciation for the social dimensions of teaching that are too often absent from discussions of teacher quality. Returning to these principles of social justice teaching are essential if we are to refocus the conversation and ensure it is grounded in classroom practice.

Creating Space to Foster Quality

One of the most pressing issues for teachers is time. A high school teacher with five classes of 40 students cannot adequately respond to student papers. An elementary teacher who has little

deters people from entering and/or staying in teaching.

But even without a significant increase in resources, schools of education, state departments of education, districts, individual schools, teacher unions, and independent groups of teacher activists all could take immediate steps to improve teacher quality.

Schools of Education and Unions

Teacher education programs can equip prospective teachers with a vision of what’s possible as well as with the tools to dismantle the unjust. Schools of education can foster collaborative communities, where students develop the habit of working together in democratic settings to create good curriculum and address difficult problems. Center X at UCLA, for instance, has decided to partner with low-performing schools, despite reservations about the scripted programs in those schools. As founder Jeannie Oakes says, “We have tried to figure out how you can have creative and constructive resistance and how you can layer in your knowledge . . . to try to craft something that has integrity and matches what we know about learning.”

Nurturing new educators in resistance and modeling the kind of pedagogy that student teachers should practice in their own placements encourages new teachers to talk back to inequality instead of quietly melting into the system. Schools of education can also enhance quality by providing ongoing support for their graduates—whether through collaborations with district and union mentoring programs, or through independent social justice teacher organizations (see article p. 11).

Teacher unions also can provide leadership. They are ideally situated to sponsor curriculum libraries, ongoing seminars, and teacher work groups. They can also be a forum for teachers to discuss how to address and resist federal and district mandates that negatively impact teaching. Too often teachers rely solely on school districts to design curriculum and strategy workshops, but teacher unions could create their own collaborative communities of study and see their missions as developing an expanded professional capacity and sense of responsibility among their members. Twenty years ago, to cite one example, the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers took another angle on work-

Educator John Dewey once wrote that ‘the fundamental trouble’ in education is a ‘lack of conversation.’

such pressures at a time of dwindling resources and growing class sizes.

Clearly, academic credentials and formal teacher certification are important parts of professional preparation, especially when they include programs such as Center X at UCLA, founded on an understanding of the inherent link between social justice and improved urban education (see p. 16). But academic credentials alone cannot guarantee high-quality instruction.

Some teachers who meet the NCLB’s definition of highly qualified have low expectations of their students and racist or class-biased attitudes toward students’ families and communities. Some use teaching methods that bore students, that don’t connect to or respect students’ lives, and that fail to encourage students to think critically about important issues.

In its 20 years of advocating for equi-

planning time—perhaps only 45 minutes per week—cannot do a quality job. These conditions undermine quality teaching and encourage teachers to leave the profession.

Educator John Dewey once wrote that “the fundamental trouble” in education is a “lack of conversation.” Such “conversation” implies thoughtful dialogue. We need to create the institutional spaces where in-depth reflection and discussion about good teaching take place on a regular basis. To do so, we need equitable and adequate school funding, smaller class sizes, mentoring programs for new teachers, in-depth staff inservice, and time for serious assessment of student work and progress. In elementary schools there need to be art, music, and physical education specialists instructing children in these important subjects. We must also address the problem of low pay that

ing for teacher quality and initiated a Peer Assistance and Evaluation program in collaboration with the administration (see article p. 30.)

Schools, Districts and Teachers

School districts and individual schools must provide ongoing, embedded professional development and move beyond episodic visits of consultants and “teacher-proof” programs. School districts need to take a leading role in facilitating processes where teachers can share their expertise through districtwide curriculum conferences, ongoing classes, mentoring programs, and inservices that model outstanding teacher practices.

As Deborah Meier points out in her interview with Catherine Capellaro, (see p. 23), a school’s culture can be the best teacher. If schools want to encourage students to become intellectuals and “citizens of the world,” they need to provide time for teachers to work on their craft instead of asking them to deliver packaged curriculum.

Some teachers, meanwhile, are taking matters into their own hands and creating social justice teacher groups

(see article p. 11). Some of these organizations sponsor study groups on social or curricular issues, some hold curriculum fairs or “teaching for social justice” conferences, some maintain listservs, some organize against testing or military recruitment abuses. Their work is another manifestation of grassroots teacher quality work—activist, hopeful, creative.

Beyond ‘Silver Bullets’

A number of the changes outlined above can be implemented even within our current and completely inadequate levels of school funding. But all of the changes require a radical shift in thinking and an acknowledgement that the knowledge and leadership of classroom teachers are the bedrock of improved teacher quality.

In the long run, addressing the crisis in teacher quality requires a multifaceted mobilization that demands adequate state and federal resources for our public schools. To be most effective, this mobilization must include teacher unions, parents, and community organizations in alliance with local school boards and district administrators.

Such efforts to forge alliances and secure adequate funding are not utopian dreams. State-by-state campaigns for funding reform have won important victories. In New Jersey, for example, the Abbott decisions have led to a sizeable increase in funds for previously disenfranchised schools. In other states, class size has been reduced. Wisconsin’s SAGE program, for example, has helped lower the student/teacher ratio in kindergarten through third grade to 15:1. And in some local districts, such as Rochester, N.Y., and Denver, there have been significant increases in local funding for innovative, union-initiated programs.

Improving teacher quality is key to building a better public school system. But it is not a matter of exhorting educators to do more with less, securing more teacher-proof curricula, or making test-driven threats. It’s a matter of reform grounded in the classroom, of respect for teaching as a profession, of a broader vision of social justice, and of improved organizing and collaboration.

All of us—teachers, parents, and union, community and school leaders—have a role to play. ■